

“BY THE PEOPLE”: REPRESENTATIVE LITERATURE AND DEMOCRATIC
REPRESENTATION IN THE UNITED STATES, 1890-1930

BY

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DISSERTATION

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines American literary writing that also asks and answers these questions about the authors of popular government and the means to represent them. I include three case studies from 1890-1930 focused on the work of Hamlin Garland, Vachel Lindsay, and James Weldon Johnson. Each of these writers created specifically literary projects designed to define and represent “the people.” I have chosen these authors because their efforts to represent the sovereign people hinge on the representative claims of the literary forms they employ: Garland’s regionalist writing promised a new understanding of rural subjects and a renovated ideal of literary culture through careful observation and recording; Lindsay’s bardic poetry hoped to discover and then circulate a genuinely popular aesthetic through personal contact with everyday people; Johnson used the representational promises inherent to black autobiography to advance his arguments about African-American citizenship. The form of literature itself plays a crucial role in these writers’ efforts to represent “the people” in the face of growing uncertainty about the form and function of body politic. My account of their attempts at representivity is also an account of their failures, for the kernel of aesthetic and political truth they seek is ultimately fictional. However, in exploring these different literary encounters with the problem of popular sovereignty in U.S. democracy of the modern period, I hope to rethink some of our basic assumptions about representing “the people” both in democracy and in literature.

For “the People”

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Introduction: Who are “The People?”

What might loosely be called democratic theory...depends on assumptions and premises that uncritical advocates have shied away from exploring, or in some cases even openly acknowledging. These half-hidden premises, unexplored assumptions, and unacknowledged antecedents form a vaguely perceived shadow theory that forever dogs the footsteps of explicit, public theories of democracy.

Robert Dahl, *Democracy and Its Critics* 3

I. “The People” in American Literature

When F.O. Matthiessen invoked the ideal of “American literature” in the opening of his now infamous 1941 book *American Renaissance*, he referred to that literature which reflected the character of the developing nation, which is to say, that literature which is most democratic. For Matthiessen, “democratic” literature was not literature that concerned itself with the explicit theme of democracy, but a mode of interest in representing the “common people.” As Matthiessen wrote in the opening of his book, “the one common denominator of my five writers, including Hawthorne and Whitman, was their devotion to the possibilities of democracy” (Matthiessen ix). These writers concerned themselves, in Matthiessen’s view, with the everyday lives of “the farmer rather than the businessman” (ix), and in so doing, they created “an organic union between labor and culture” (xv). He repeatedly insisted that each of the five authors belonged to the economic class of the masses, and that this position “undoubtedly helped

cause them all to scrutinize the world of which they were part” (78).¹ Matthiessen credited these authors for writing American literature because these “men of the people” rendered the authentic concerns of the common masses of the United States in their literary art.

American literature, in short, was “American” because it represented the “common people.” Matthiessen’s argument for a coherent American literary tradition became popular because it crystallized decades of thought about both American literature and democratic thought.² In its search for democratic literature, *American Renaissance* transplanted the imperative of democratic politics—to represent the interests of the sovereign people—onto the field of literary production and criticism. Since the foundation of the Republic, political thinkers have tended to equate “democracy” with the supposed conditions of U.S. politics.³ Naturally, the search for a distinct American literary tradition turned to the same cultural trademark. American literature was democratic literature, and democratic literature engaged with and represented the concerns of the common man. According to these assumptions, American literature realized in art that which democratic politics hoped to achieve in public life.

Yet to speak of “democratic literature,” or to relate literary production to the aims of democratic politics, is to butt against a myth shared by both democratic literature and democratic politics: the myth of “the people” themselves. Democratic politics since the *Federalist* wrestled with the form and nature of sovereign national people. Political historian John Gunnell writes: “While it was assumed that a republican or democratic regime required an identifiable and autonomous people, it was at the same time difficult, after the Revolution, to specify any such entity in the American polity” (15). This

difficulty persisted into the late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when the forces of modernization, the steady influx of immigrants, and the clamor for increased popular control threatened any notion that the sovereign people existed as a coherent body with a unified political will. The many solutions to this political problem that emerged—from Populism, to Progressivism, to pluralism—attempted, in some sense, to define both *who* “the people” were and *how* their interests could be represented in government. That is, the late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries saw the emergence of new cultural and political strategies designed to preserve the ideal of popular sovereignty in American democracy by attempting to answer these questions: who are the people, and how do we represent them?

This dissertation examines American literary writing that also asks and answers these questions about the authors of popular government and the means to represent them. I include three case studies from 1890-1930 focused on the work of Hamlin Garland, Vachel Lindsay, and James Weldon Johnson. Each of these writers created specifically literary projects designed to define and represent “the people.” These literary projects do different work than featuring “the public,” “the people,” “crowds,” or “mobs” as structuring thematic concerns. Instead, I have chosen these authors because their efforts to represent the sovereign people hinge on the representative claims of the literary forms they employ: Garland’s regionalist writing promised a new understanding of rural subjects and a renovated ideal of literary culture through careful observation and recording; Lindsay’s bardic poetry hoped to discover and then circulate a genuinely popular aesthetic through personal contact with everyday people; Johnson used the representational promises inherent to black autobiography to advance his arguments

about African-American citizenship. The form of literature itself plays a crucial role in these writers' efforts to represent "the people" in the face of growing uncertainty about the form and function of body politic. My account of their attempts at representivity is also an account of their failures, for the kernel of aesthetic and political truth they seek is ultimately fictional. However, in exploring these different literary encounters with the problem of popular sovereignty in U.S. democracy of the modern period, I hope to rethink some of our basic assumptions about representing "the people" both in democracy and in literature.

To study past literary strategies for locating and representing the sovereign people is to enter a theoretical debate about the nature and solvency of democratic government and political representation that continues today. We can see the stakes of finding and speaking for "the people" in the political world of the early-twenty first century. One of the most memorable recent examples was in October of 2008, when "Joe the Plumber" appeared on the American political scene. An apparently casual audience member at one of Barack Obama's campaign stops, Samuel J. Wurzelbacher became a figure of national interest when he questioned the impact of small business taxes on working people. "I'm being taxed more and more for fulfilling the American dream," Wurzelbacher declared to Obama (Tapper para. 18). In making this challenge, Wurzelbacher availed himself as the McCain campaign's ideal spokesperson for the Republican entrepreneurial everyman, a "regular guy" from "Middle America" whose business ambitions—the "American dream"—would be crushed by Obama's supposedly socialist ambitions to "spread the wealth around." An incarnation of Sarah Palin's popular "Joe Six Pack," Wurzelbacher seemed like the ideal tool for McCain to highlight his connection to "ordinary" people

and cast Obama as (among other things) an elitist with totalitarian ambitions.

Yet in its obvious failures, the Joe the Plumber gambit revealed the piece of political mythology the McCain camp was clumsily attempting to control. At a rally in Defiance, Ohio, McCain mistakenly believed that Wurzelbacher would be present and asked him to be recognized. When it became clear that Wurzelbacher was absent, he quickly improvised “alright, well, you're all Joe the Plumber so all of you stand up” (Weiner para. 1). Joe the Plumber was not merely a man, but a metaphor for the common people that supposedly wield sovereignty. The McCain campaign went to great lengths to establish this fiction, even offering a defense of Wurzelbacher's indefensibly inflammatory foreign policy discussion of Israel: “While he's clearly his own man,” a statement read, “so far Joe has offered some penetrating and clear analysis that cuts to the core of many of the concerns people have with Barack Obama's statements and policies” (Orr para. 18)⁴ However implausible of an interpretation this may be (Wurzelbacher declared that a vote for Obama was “death to Israel”), it is a strikingly bald attempt ascribe the capabilities of governing to someone who has no such capabilities. “Joe the Plumber”—a fiction engineered by Republican campaign strategists—was not merely a gimmick to drum up votes in Midwestern swing states, but a struggle to define the location, meaning, and capabilities of the sovereign “people.”

The absurdity of elevating a seemingly random individual to the position of political everyman highlights a basic problem of political representation: who do representatives actually represent, and what is the nature of their representative acts? In the long history of democracy in Western civilization, political representation was an innovation of the 18th century. Before then, democracy was a political system in which

citizens were supposed to represent themselves. In his discussion of democracy's historical transformations, Robert Dahl refers to the ideals of the Athenian polis, in which citizens would participate directly in the decision making process. This arrangement necessarily limited the size of the sovereign citizenry, or *demos*,⁵ because an excessively large and heterogeneous citizenry would make deliberation and consensus disorderly, or even impossible (Dahl 18-19). Thus, to create a modern democracy on the scale of a nation state, democracy's traditional commitment to direct participation needed to change. Even if the citizenry were as exclusive as that of a Greek city state, the sheer size of a nation state demanded different strategies to manage collective decision-making processes. Political representation—the practice of using professional politicians to literally and metaphorically represent the will of their constituencies—was perhaps the most important development in creating nation-sized democracies. James Mill, in 1920, called political representation “the grand discovery of modern times” because it offered to solve the problem of scale confronting modern democracies (Mill, qtd. in Dahl 29). Political representation is therefore an attempt to maintain citizen rule across spatial and populational scales that prevent direct citizen participation.

Political representation, then, introduces the challenge of “reading” an object that was supposed to be capable of speaking for itself—the *demos* (note that this assumption is also something we will revisit below). As F.R. Ankersmit has argued, there is an epistemological distance between the “political reality” of the electorate and the agencies of government that supposedly act on its behalf (18, 38-40). This semiotic gap, I contend, is both the innovation of modern democracy and the source of some of its deepest anxieties about legitimacy. Representative government offers to somehow transfer the

will of the governed into a constituent assembly where collective decision making can still occur, yet in doing so, it must create a fiction of “the people” for whom it can speak reliably. And while this fiction might be more plausible when the *demos* in question is culturally and politically homogeneous, the ideal of a unified “people” who can be reliably represented becomes less tenable in the face of increased heterogeneity in the *demos*. This heterogeneity is one that we have come to recognize and celebrate in the contemporary United States, and it is also the reason that “Joe the Plumber” so obviously fails as a spokesperson for “Middle America,” and, moreover, why “Middle America” fails as an attempt to capture “common Americans.” Speaking plainly, there is no such thing as “common people,” “everyday Americans,” “Joe Six Pack,” or even “the people” as a coherent author of government. This oft-ignored reality of democratic politics is built into the very structure of U.S. government, from its interest groups, advocacy groups, lobbying, etc. It was recognized in Obama's campaign rhetoric, which attempted (after the form of Croly, who we will examine below) to subsume the differences that define people of the U.S. under a renewed national purpose. The political and cultural homogeneity required to imagine a coherent, nation-wide *demos* that we can call “the people” simply does not exist. What, then, of a government (or a literature) that supposedly represents them?

II. Massification, Democracy, and Literature

It would be naïve to suggest that the period this dissertation studies—the closing of the nineteenth century and the first three decades of the twentieth—was the only time that the U.S. struggled with the meaning of popular sovereignty. When the

Enlightenment-era Framers introduced representation as a mechanism for extending popular sovereignty to a national scale, they supposed a distinction between rational citizens capable of prioritizing public interest (white, male, and property-holding) and the irrational masses who could only think of themselves. As Gordon Wood writes in *The Creation of the American Republic*, “the Federalists hoped to create an entirely new and original sort of republican government—a republic which did not require a virtuous people for its sustenance” (475).⁶ The masses at large, who had in the years after the Revolution enjoyed greater political authority, were to be reigned in by a federal government that could properly prioritize national welfare over a narrowly self-interested “democratic despotism” (409).⁷ It was, to use Wood’s phrasing, “the worthy against the licentious.” (471).⁸ In short, the viability of popular sovereignty on a national scale at the moment of its origin relied on an exclusive reduction of *who* constituted the body politic.

According to the scheme that Madison, Hamilton, and Jay described in the *Federalist*, stable government depended on the strategic management and mediation of citizens’ will. Faction, argues Madison—the groups that form naturally in civilization along ideological differences and conflicting material interests—cannot be eliminated. Neither the complete suppression of liberty, nor the equal extension of political rights, he states, adequately resolve the “factious spirit” inherent to liberal government. Pure democracy, where each person represents himself and his own interests, necessarily fails because unjust majorities or selfish individuals lose sight of the public good.⁹

The Republic, in contrast, balances the demands of popular government and the needs of public good through “a scheme of representation,” a “body of chosen citizens” who act on behalf of those they represent. The people, however, do not speak for

themselves. As Madison explains in “Federalist No. 10,” representative government functions to “refine and enlarge the public views, by passing them through the medium of a chosen body of citizens, whose wisdom may best discern the true interest of their country, and whose patriotism and love of justice will be least likely to sacrifice it to temporary or partial considerations” (Madison 38). Representatives in this scheme are interpreters rather than readers; they process signals from the collective and resituate them according to their own superior experience and concern for national well-being. Such representatives know the will of the people even if the people themselves do not, and it follows that “it may well happen that the public voice, pronounced by the representatives of the people, will be more consonant to the public good than if pronounced by the people themselves, convened for the purpose” (38). In this imaginary scheme of political interaction, representatives exceed their peers in wisdom and patriotism in order to speak for the will and well being of the ordinary citizen. The people are heeded in spirit, but they are ultimately directed by a representative of superior political abilities.

The end of the nineteenth century saw a number of historical changes that intensified the old questions about the nature and viability of popular sovereignty. As democratic citizenship extended to former slaves, new immigrant populations, and women; and as uneven economic abuses and urbanization sparked mass movements for recognition and power, and as accounts of political corruption became more commonplace, the Federalist conception of political representatives as disinterested guardians over a “licentious” public became increasingly difficult to accept even as the shape and meaning of the body politic was in historical flux.¹⁰ That is to say, the body

politic was diversifying and demanding power at the same time that the inauguration of a new mass age raised new doubts about the viability of popular sovereignty. Writing in Europe, Gustave Le Bon called this period in Western history “the Era of Crowds.” Le Bon’s theory of mass society, influential in the United States as well as Europe (Hitler reportedly admired the book and studied it for writing *Mein Kampf*), saw two major historical transformations contributing to this “Era”: “The first is the destruction of those religious, political, and social beliefs in which all the elements of our civilization are rooted. The second is the creation of entirely new conditions of existence and thought as the result of modern scientific and industrial discoveries” (Le Bon xiv). The results are “the masses” of modern times who, as Le Bon claims, lack the cognitive powers to reason through problems. Instead, he claims, these masses possess mental capacities similar to “savages or children” (109-110), and as such they must be manipulated by tapping into their animating “sentiment” (109).

Other scholars recognize these historical transformations as well. Russ Castronovo takes a national strike day in 1877 as the beginning of the United States’ engagement with the problems of these anarchic multitudes. “The year 1877 stands as a watershed moment of historical crisis when the image of crowds, the mob, ‘the people,’ the mass—contemporary observers had their pick of loaded terms—challenges ideas of the American world as a place of order and unity” (Castronovo 22). In another study of democracy and literature of the modern mass age, Mary Esteve points to a series of problems facing mass-liberal democracy that pressurized the question of crowds and their nature: “the stipulations of citizenship, nation formation, mass immigration, and the emergence of mass media” (Esteve 4). Daria Frezza’s study of crowds in American public

discourse similarly marks the beginning of a crowd-era in U.S. history in the economic turmoil of the 1870s and the rapid industrialization and urbanization that characterized the last decades of the 1800s (Frezza 11-12). Like Esteve, Frezza explains the contemporaneous emergence of social sciences in terms of their engagement with the political problems that crowds posed for liberal democracy, as well as the “steady influx of immigrant workers coming from the poorest rural parts of Europe, filling the urban ghettos, and voicing their protests in big-city demonstrations.” Equally important, argues Frezza, were “post-Reconstruction migrations from the southern states” which added African Americans to “the polyglot crowds” (12). Of course, African-American presence in urban spaces would intensify further early in the twentieth century, igniting questions about the racial makeup of citizens and the nation (Hutchinson 3-10).

The vocabulary that emerged to describe these multitudes of the modern time index the differing expectations of what they could accomplish politically. The language of “crowds,” “mobs,” and “masses” reflected a Le Bonian cynicism of their capacities—crowds were aimless but excitable, mobs were irrationally mobilized towards some ignorant end, and masses were the vast and inert body of citizenry that weighed down cultural progress. On the other hand, “the people” and “the public,” and at times, “the State” were used by those who imagined that these multitudes possessed the ability to wield sovereignty, that the Federalist mistrust that led them to consolidate power in representative bodies were obsoleted by modern education, national press, and the corruption of professional politicians in the Gilded Age. The literary writing I study is lodged in this historical context of what I will call “massification”—the increasing “massness” of the national citizenry that pressurized questions of democratic governance

and gave rise to various cultural and political solutions to the problem of defining and empowering the body politic.

From the late nineteenth century to the 1930s, I identify three distinct intellectual responses to massification: populism, progressivism, and pluralism. I have paired each of the literary projects I study with one of these three intellectual responses—I consider Garland’s Veritism as the further extension of populism’s politics of representation; I explain Lindsay’s theory of New Localism in terms of Progressive fantasies about cultivating a national public; and I reread Johnson’s literary efforts at racial uplift as a strategic application of pluralist political sensibilities. These pairings, as we will see below, do not exhaust the potential lines of influence between writers and the intellectual responses I have chosen. Lindsay, for example, shared an admiration of Bryan’s populism. Garland’s interest in drawing the apparatuses of literary and political representation closer to the people anticipated later Progressive efforts to build a better government around an improved understanding of the public. Johnson’s attempts to reconcile black citizenship with white racists’ defense of so-called “universal citizenship” reads as both a pluralist critique of white-supremacist politics and as a Populist response to an elitist government that consolidates power against the interests of the governed. In the pages that follow, however, I make a brief case for how each of these writers and their literary projects converse with the intellectual responses to massification that mark this period of history.

This dissertation begins with Hamlin Garland's work of the early 1890s. Indeed, Garland exhibited both an awareness of and optimism about the mass-turn in the late-nineteenth century, writing later in the 1890s “the supreme movement of the age...has

been the rise of the people, the growth of the average personality and the widening of sympathy” (Garland, “Evolution”5). Garland's alignment with the Farmer's Alliance, the Grange movement, and (later) Populism, as well as his consistent early commitment to evolving U.S. democracy make his work a useful starting point for the consideration of narrative representations' intervention in the problem of popular sovereignty. When I speak of Garland and populism, I do not refer (unless otherwise indicated) to the political party of that name (Populist), but of the general rhetorical pattern of empowering ordinary people against elites. Populism in this general sense, argues Michael Kazin, is “able to protest social and economic inequalities without calling the entire system into question” by simplistically claiming that “virtue resides in the simple people” (2). The populism of Garland's time defined the conflict between “producers” and “elites” as a moral struggle rather than a class struggle. This “producerism,” as Kazin explains, “was indeed an ethic, a moral conviction: it held that only those who created wealth in tangible, material ways (on and under the land, in workshops, on the sea) could be trusted to guard the nation's piety and liberty” (13). Garland adapted populist producerism's vision of injustice, as well as its moral imperatives about common people, to the realm of cultural production and cultural representation. As he claimed in *Crumbling Idols*, “the common people of the nation form the sustaining power of its social life and art” (74). Just as producers of wealth were the rightful owners of political sovereignty, the everyday producers of culture, for Garland, should properly exercise authority over artistic standards. To rearrange the structures of literary-aesthetic governance was likewise to promote the producerist ethic across American culture.

Garland blended these populist sensibilities with his unique beliefs about the

continuing evolution of common people in modern society. A correspondent with Whitman toward the end of his life, Garland hoped to adapt and better realize the Whitmanic dream of popular democracy at a moment in history when “the people” were more ready to understand it. “To be a follower of Whitman,” he explains,

means to have a like faith in the modern man and his future...and above all to have the same love for men as men, and the same appreciation for the common things of the present...[the poet of democracy] must delight in the vast streams of human life flowing round him like a sea.

(“Evolution”¹¹, italics in original)

For Garland, the masses had become sufficiently “modern” to appreciate Whitman's aesthetic principles—appreciation of the present, the beauty of the common, and a rejection of authority. This “modern mass,” Garland believed, could not only be the subject of a decentralized literature but could also be the spirit of a more democratic government. To realize these democratic potentials, Garland emphasized the need to create an art form that was both *popular* and *representative*. Literary writing could, in his estimation, circulate the truth about everyday life in the U.S. and, in so doing, would cultivate a wider appreciation for the variations of American culture across its many regions.

Garland's regionalism attempted to articulate the representative aesthetics of literature to the problem of political representation that became increasingly pressurized during the massification of the late 19th century. Garland called his aesthetic “veritism” rather than “regionalism” (the term his colleague and promoter William Dean Howells used), yet the fact that both were essentially local color writing signals a remarkable

interplay between “truth” and “region,” between knowledge and space. If the crucial political question was “who are the masses?”, then Veritism found the answer in discrete, spatially-contained communities with internally consistent political and cultural values. It fell to Veritist writers to document and showcase these “regions” of American life, to elevate the aesthetic value of life and culture outside the metropolitan centers of the East in an effort to destabilize their centralized authority. Veritism had less a vision of coherence for the national public than a passion for discovering the variations in everyday life across the nation’s territory.

Mapping difference through a novel, representative literature addressed some problems in the popular basis of sovereignty—namely, explaining how diversity would not be a problem amongst “common people” who shared the same aesthetic appreciation of common life, whatever the form. Yet neither this aesthetic orientation, nor its companion ethic of producerism, provided a concrete means to unify a heterogeneous body politic for the purposes of exercising sovereignty. While Veritism and populism could celebrate commonness, they hardly explained what that principle of commonness could be outside of a moral/aesthetic orientation. The Progressives, in particular, engaged the fragmented, incapable polity with an interest in concrete programs and scientific knowledge. Rather than rely on a simplified ethic or aesthetic of common people, Progressives saw the multiple and specific ways in which the citizenry fell short of the ideal of a unified, capable body politic that could coherently authorize government through an identifiable voice of consensus. Herbert Croly described the problem in his landmark 1909 work, *The Promise of American Life*:

The changes which have been taking place in industrial and political and

social conditions have all tended to impair the consistency of feeling characteristic of the first phase of American national democracy.

Americans are divided from one another...by difference of interest, of intellectual outlook, of moral and technical standards, and manner of life.

(138)

Croly differentiated this condition from the Western pioneers, whose common life conditions enabled a “homogeneity of feeling” critical to the success of democracy (63, 139) “The unity of such a state,” Croly argues about democracy, “must lie deeper than any bond established by obedience to a single political authority, or by the acceptance of common precedents and ideas. It must be based in some measure upon an instinctive familiarity of association, upon a quick communicability of sympathy, upon the easy and effortless sense of companionship.” The pioneer mentality of the early U.S. was created by “social necessity.” These early citizens “were to enrich themselves by the development of their country.” In short, men were made equal by their challenging circumstances just as they were also made alike: “all his surroundings tended to make his neighbors like himself—to bind them together by common interests, feelings and ideas” (62). Individuals were rendered equal by the same conditions that aligned their “interests, feelings, and ideas.”

Dahl calls this belief in equality within a demos the “Strong Principle of Equality,” which is the assumption that “all the members of an association are adequately qualified to participate on equal footing with the other in the process of governing the association” (31). For the Garland and other populists, this principle was the condition of being a common producer and/or sharing an aesthetic orientation toward common life. In

Croly's assessment of the Western Democrats, the Strong Principle and the “homogeneity of feeling” exist as a result of the same challenging pioneer-era conditions. “The average man,” he concludes, “was the useful man” (63).¹¹ Yet where the pioneer had achieved unity, he had sacrificed too much individuality. The “higher type” of individuality devoted to “resolute, efficient, and intense pursuit of special ideals, standards and occupations” threatened this unity of feeling because it was based on a simplified homogeneity created by brute necessity. The unity of the Western Democrat, in other words, could not accommodate citizens more vibrant intellectual activities because their fellow feeling and equality was rooted in mere subsistence. Croly's complaint that “homogeneity of feeling” was lacking in modern life was not a call to return to the pioneer spirit, but a challenge to cultivate a “national purpose” that would unify the higher-order individual pursuits that had undermined the early nation's subsistence-based coherence.

In doing so, Croly sounded the call to other Progressives to discover and build a national people capable of wielding sovereignty. Where Veritism had found this unity in an evolving commitment to the beauty of the present, it did not discover (or offer to discover) a basic principle of coherence like the one Croly and other Progressives desired. The Progressive solution relied on expertise, scientific study, and centralized authority to craft such a polity. Education and social programs could create a Strong Principle of Equality by uplifting the masses to be equally worthy of governance. As one of the most influential texts of the Progressive era, *The Promise of American Life* allows us to view Progressive politics not simply for its emphasis on state programs and expertise, but for its interest in cultivating a coherent national people against the forces of

massification.

Progressive-era literature likewise studied the nature of the masses with an interest in their eventual uplift.¹² This literature of social exploration aimed to document and explain the differences between middle-class audiences and the seemingly inscrutable underclass. As Mark Pittenger writes, many believed that laborers and the poor “were somehow fundamentally different—a strange breed in classless America” (1). By becoming the underclass, by joining with them, these social investigators believed that their true (very different) nature could be learned (40). Interested members of the middle class sought to explore the nature of class difference against the progressive fantasy of a single class (or “classless”) society for a number of purposes, from moral correction to labor organization, to immigrant assimilation, to explaining away the causes of unrest (Higbie 561, 571). As Kathryn Oberdeck notes, such writing also “expressed a sense of cultural superiority that encouraged Progressives’ efforts to ‘manage’ groups they perceived as living beyond the racial, ethnic, or class boundaries of ‘civilization’” (201-202). “Tramping” could also be a liberating experience for the individual to escape the limitations of middle-class society (Higbie 568). Yet still others wished to explore this “domestic dark continent” for its primitive vigor (Pittenger 47). Troped as evolutionarily or ethnically distant, these class and racial subalterns were fertile fuel for white middle-class fantasies of cultural reform.

Because Progressive-era literature of social exploration meant to discover the obstacles (or the justifications) for expert-driven programs of social reform, it was fundamentally concerned with the question of discovering “the people” who might serve as members of an uplifted body politic. Progressive literary writing often served the

larger political goal of renovating the masses of the modern era into the national public of reformers' fantasies. Sketching this literary and historical context provides opportunity to reintroduce Vachel Lindsay's ambitious "New Localism" to contemporary literary studies. In the years before Croly published *Promise*, Lindsay toured the country on foot writing and reciting poetry. Like Garland, Lindsay saw his literary project as the evolutionary advancement of Walt Whitman's democratic vision. "Now Whitman in his wildest dreams," he said in a 1923 letter, "was only a pretended troubadour. He sat still in cafes...Whitman only *fancied* the crowd. I have *met* them face to face" (*Letters* 298, 300). Lindsay did not study the "crowd" as a scientific expert (as some reformers had), but as self-styled bard in search of a genuinely popular shared aesthetic in the United States. His doctrine of "New Localism" encouraged citizens to become citizen-artists, to exercise their aesthetic faculties to beautify their towns and cities. Lindsay wanted to "know" the people because he hoped to create an aesthetic that would unify their sympathies and feelings. Much like Croly's "national purpose," Lindsay's New Localism hoped to subsume difference to a shared social and aesthetic mission without sacrificing the exercise of "higher individuality." In "The Congo," his most infamous poem, this search for an underlying popular aesthetic led to a naïve and problematic experiment with racial representation. Yet the fact that Lindsay's search for a popular aesthetic turned to racial categories of identity also signal the utility of the category of "race" itself in the question of defining a polity. Lindsay idealized Africans for their unified feeling and devotion to art the way that Croly looked to Western Democrats as examples of coherent nationhood. Each enabled democratic representation to function without having to deal with the problem of difference.

It is nothing new to suggest that theories of racial identity and beliefs about citizenship informed one another in the early 20th century. Racist whites believed that blacks were not fit to be citizens and sought to limit their political power through Jim Crow laws, lynching campaigns, and party alliances—beliefs that were perpetuated by racist stereotypes claiming to speak reliably about all African-Americans. These racist fears attributed a host of characteristics to the dangerous black masses; they were alternately considered naïve, manipulable savages who could not understand the basic principles of democracy (as one of Thomas Dixon’s characters would notably state in *The Leopard’s Spots*, freedmen citizens believe that “electoral franchise” is a substance that can be put into a bag (Dixon 104-105)) and a terrifyingly organized racial solidarity that threatened the comparatively disorganized white citizens. Beliefs about racial identity, I argue, can chart the basic problems of mass organization in democracy. In the white racist imaginary, *black* masses inherited the intensified anxieties about the generalized masses in democracy as both naïve crowds or politically motivated mobs—they were both easily swayed by political influences because of their inability to be deliberative citizens, and capable of acting in unison to upset structures of authority. Dixon’s *Leopard’s Spots* discloses a longing for whites to achieve the same level of racial solidarity that it hatefully ascribe to blacks. The Ku Klux Klan fulfills this promise by becoming a unified force of political violence, the just mob that works to destroy the enemy mob in order to save democracy from the insurgency of black counter citizens.

No account of the national struggle over the shape and meaning of the U.S. body politic can neglect the problem of the color line in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. This period, known as the “nadir” of race relations in the United States, saw the

question of African-American citizenship explode into mob violence and systematic political repression. Racist whites depended on homogenizing caricatures of African-Americans as on the one hand the sub-human rabble incapable of wielding the privileges of citizenship, and on the other hand the deviously united, highly organized threat of “Negro Domination.” This twin anxiety about the black masses as either an unstable crowd or a politically threatening mob parallels the broader cultural anxieties about the generalized masses and their capacities as citizens. The color line debate about African-American citizenship thus inherited the conceptual baggage of mass citizenship in liberal democracy. If one of liberal democracy’s struggles during this historical moment was to accommodate differences of all kinds within the body politic when the old myths of homogeneity appeared less and less viable, the question of African-American citizenship struck at the racial foundation of the body politic. The very idea of a “black citizen” focalized the generic disruption that masses posed to framer-era ideals of the body politic.

The literary project of representing the race to whites was not new to U.S. literary culture, as earlier slave narratives used literacy to demonstrate both the humanity and the intellectual capability of African Americans. Yet the context of Jim Crow repression of African-American citizenship rights posed new challenges to textual representations of blacks to whites. James Weldon Johnson’s *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* packages itself as an authentic account of African-American life for the edification of white audiences. In so positioning itself, the text accepts the basic structure of parliamentary representation because it offers an overview of the black masses as a legally demarcated (and in this case, terribly stigmatized and persecuted) constituency. To accept “race” as the boundaries of such a constituency was undoubtedly to accept some

of the baggage of racial definition itself, for it signaled that an entire group of very different citizens could be treated in the same account by the same speaker. That is, it accepted the racist logic that a stigmatized phenotype tied to one's link to slavery could signify membership in a collective. Yet the very logic of representative government, as we have seen, asks that the object of political representation have some measure of homogeneity underpinning its collective voice. Otherwise, how could a completely fragmented body politic reliably authorize its representative? Johnson's bid to represent African Americans walks this line—it leverages its audience's expectations of racial homogeneity in order to situate African-Americans as a constituency. Notably, he does not take up an assimilationist position, but argues instead for recognition of African Americans according to the abstract principles of universal citizenship. And while the Framers' understanding of “universal” did not include blacks, Johnson's work throughout his career was to hold the U.S. accountable to the meaning of that theory of citizenship.

Despite the fact that Johnson openly lobbied his audiences to accept the political and cultural diversity of “the Negro,” Johnson still relied on the homogenizing category of “race” in his campaign for African-American progress. Because essential categories of difference were digestible to U.S. sensibilities about parliamentary representation and constituency, they were adaptable to the basic problem of representation in liberal democracy that intensified at the end of the 19th century. Confronted with the unreality of any homogeneous or organic state, the cultural pluralist solutions that emerged in the early 20th century U.S. attempted to render *cultural* what had been *spatial*—that is, they adapted the concept of “community of interest” from a spatial phenomenon to a “cultural” phenomenon. Rather than imagine, like Garland, that clusters of political

homogeneity were bounded by region, cultural pluralists like Horace Kallen and Randolph Bourne imagined that such “nuclei” of political coherence could be discovered within groups sharing the same “culture.” Johnson’s project of racial representation therefore balances the challenges of eroding homogenizing stereotype against the rules of engagement for political representation. His work marks a key intersection between discourses of racial uplift and the shifting demands of democratic representation during the turn to pluralism.

The simultaneity of Johnson’s anti-racist politics and his literary bids for citizenship that traded on racial categories of identity signal a broader contradiction in U.S. democratic pluralism. Pluralism in the U.S. was not simply a matter of enshrining simplified and essentialized difference, but an extended paradigmatic response to the crumbling myth of a unified, “organic” body politic.¹³ Pluralism reschematized politics as the political voices of competing interests rather than imagine that an organic national people existed. As Gunnell notes, pluralist conceptions of political identity were not necessarily anti-racist ones. That is, in recognizing “difference” along racial lines (for as we will see in the case of Kallen, his definition of “culture” was more indebted to ideas of “race” than Boas’ anthropology),¹⁴ pluralist thought adapted racial epistemology of categories to a system of popular governing that was failing to accommodate anything less than cultural homogeneity in its model of the body politic. Pluralism, in other words, should be understood less as an attempt to fetishize difference (an understandable projection of contemporary problems for someone who has lived through the multiculturalism and identity politics of the later 20th century) than as a project to revise popular sovereignty that ultimately fell on the double-edged sword of racial identity

categories.

Rejecting attempts to represent “race” and “culture” as the oppressive imposition of essentialized identity completely ignores pluralism’s conceptual innovation. Where the racist codes homogenizing African-Americans as unfit to exercise the citizenship rights ascribed citizenship exclusively to whites, pluralism renarrated deviations from the white norm as virtues rather than obstacles to citizenship. This emphasis on “difference” was a matter of mapping the Framer-era tropes of federalism on to cultural variation. In “Transnational America,” Randolph Bourne calls for a “federated ideal” (282) to counteract the country’s lack of “constraining national purpose” (281). For Bourne, this new “federated ideal” takes the shape of a cosmopolitan national fabric, whose constituent parts edify one another. Calling for a true “world-federation in miniature” (288), Bourne extols the virtues of cultural alliances over cultural assimilation: “This strength of cooperation,” he says of a federated national ideal, “this feeling that all who are here may have a hand in the destiny of America, will make for a finer spirit of integration than any narrow ‘Americanism’ or forced chauvinism” (292).

Kallen’s 1915 “Democracy vs. The Melting Pot” similarly advocated for a federation of identifiable “cultures” a year before Bourne’s essay. Kallen described the growing profile of “cultural” entities as increasingly complementary to the United States’ existing constituent entities, the states: “For in effect the United States are in the process of becoming a federal state not merely as a union of geographical and administrative unities [STATES], but also as a cooperation of cultural diversities, as a federation or commonwealth of national cultures” (116). Where Bourne saw a general spirit of cooperation between cultures producing a hybridized “cosmopolitan” national spirit,

Kallen specifically indicated a renovated bureaucracy based on cultural centers. “Cultural” labels would literally create discrete memberships within the body politic who could be administered through their own bureaucracies. Speaking of this new “federation,” Kallen explains: “Its form would be that of the federal republic; its substance a democracy of nationalities, cooperating voluntarily and autonomously through common institutions in the enterprise of self-realization through the perfection of men according to their kind” (124). In the absence of an organic national public unified by heritage and sensibilities, Kallen proposed to redraw the lines of sovereignty around the pockets of discernable homogeneity that he saw emerging in the increasingly diverse United States. And while these “essentialized identities” most certainly make assumptions about the politics, beliefs, and lives of their supposed members, they also provide the social underpinning for a reliable—albeit modified—democratic government. This remarkable adaptation of 18th century anti-federalist principles to 20th century heterogeneity made sense because it rendered *cultural* what had been for anti-federalists a *spatial* principle of political coherence (more in Chapter 1). Imagining cultural “likeness” of essentialized identity became a strategy to articulate diversity in the body politic to a more democratic system of representation, not deny rights.

Much like anti-representationalist theories of democracy I will explain below, literary critics have rejected the pluralist logic of representation because it is semiotically flawed. In the case of pluralism, it oppressively imposes a racist epistemology of essentialized identity categories. Walter Benn Michaels has argued that the cultural pluralism that emerged in the interwar United States merely remaps racism’s ontological assumptions about essential identity to cultural identities instead. Pluralism, he argues,

works by “*deriving* one’s beliefs and practices *from* one’s cultural identity instead of *equating* one’s beliefs and practices *with* one’s cultural identity” (Michaels 16). For Michaels, the existence of standalone essential “identities” that dictate the “beliefs and practices” of their members ends up reprising the problems of racist stereotype. Michaels’ arguments about pluralism and essentialized identity, as well as the critical tendency they represent, therefore overlook pluralism’s attempts to renovate a broken myth of the body politic by focusing on the insidious creep of racism. While it is important, as Michaels does, to notice the dangerous assumptions that any so-called progressive reform might recast and recirculate, such realizations should not occlude pluralism’s engagement with the larger historical problem of popular sovereignty. Moreover, even as we live today with the legacy of essentialized racial categories, our society continues to struggle with the form and meaning of the body politic despite pluralism’s attempt to resolve that question.

III. Literature and Politics

The history of the search for the body politic, from the foundation of the Republic to the age of massification to the Republican politics of “middle America” in the twenty-first century, is a history of justifying the arrangement of society at a given moment as a progressively more efficient, more ethical, and more sound in judgment than previous iterations of democratic popular sovereignty. The successive efforts to discover and empower the body politic have not yielded revolutionary insights into who “the people” are because, as we have already discussed, “the people” are a fiction. Where they are supposed to be homogeneous, the real material plurality of people belies these

suppositions. Where “the people” are assumed to be heterogeneous, the categories involved in defining that heterogeneity (race, class, gender, region, status, background, etc.) break down in the face of concrete exceptions to those categories. If we have discovered anything, it is how fraught the enterprise of representing the “political reality” of the body politic in representative assemblies or literature can be. This problem of political and literary representation—the uncertainty of “accurate” representation of an ultimately unknowable object that is never anything more than the fictions that encircle it—has prompted both literary scholars and political theorists to retreat from representation altogether.

One of today's most prominent literary scholars writing on the subject of literature, representation, and democracy is Dana Nelson, and her recent work on presidential aesthetics shares this suspicion of representation. Yet Nelson's formulation, “the people vs presidentialism,” simply offers one myth in favor of another. For Nelson, presidentialism is the logic that suppresses local involvement by symbolically locking up democracy in the figure of the president. This “presidential logic” blocks the democratic energy inherent in locally focused citizen democracy.¹⁵ While Nelson helpfully critiques the problem of presidential authority in the history of American politics, she resorts to another myth in doing so—“the people.” Nelson avoids introducing any authoritative symbols in political representation of her own by insisting on local communities that take up citizen power, as well as a return to “extragovernmental” assemblies that marked the pre-Constitutional United States (D. Nelson 32). Her approach to restoring democracy admirably foregrounds activism and civic engagement. But it does return us to the political problems faced by the framers—that is, how to extend collective decision-

making to the scale of a nation state? Nelson's solution is essentially to reinvigorate the Athenian polis' emphasis on proximity and direct engagement and revise its needs for homogeneity and exclusivity. Indeed, to invoke "the people" today is an entirely different matter than invoking "the people" for the Framers, for early citizens, as we all know, excluded women, some men, and all African Americans. While it is true that introducing representatives did, in Nelson's words "take democracy out of the hands of the *demos*," it is not true that this *demos* was the same as "the many, the people" (13). It is also difficult to say that it took power away, since the people never practically held sovereignty over a national government other than through the foundation of the representative system. Nelson's solution, then, amounts to a rejection of political representation itself. It suggests that the purest form of democracy lies in individuals representing their own interests, yet such an arrangement is not always possible in a nation-sized state. In Nelson's thinking, "democracy" and the state are in tension; if democracy properly lies in the hands of non-elected citizen assemblies, then how can a nation-sized state bureaucracy function practically?

In the field of political theory, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri have mounted a somewhat similar retreat from the problem of political representation in their theory of the "multitude." Posed in opposition to the global order famously labeled "Empire," the multitude makes up the material for "a new project for democracy" (328)—one that breaks apart the traditional limits of sovereignty and representation and empowers individual subjects *en masse*. According to Hardt and Negri, the multitude rules itself through an intricate networking of component subjects, not through centralized authority, governmental or otherwise. Conceptually, they argue, the multitude's sovereignty over

itself is like the function of the brain/body complex that neurobiologists describe: “The brain does not decide through the dictation of some center of command. Its decision is the common disposition or configuration of the entire neural network in communication with the body as a whole and its environment. A single decision is produced by a multitude in the brain and body” (338). It is, as they explain it alternately, comparable to open source software development, where collaborative intelligence and open standards can effectively solve social problems (340). Although this new project for democracy would take place on a global scale—because, as they argue, today's producers are networked and autonomous in ways not seen before in history—it is compelling at local and global levels because it tries to think of power as entirely (and perhaps impossibly) distributed throughout any human network. Remarkably, the authors pitch the “multitude” as a solution to representation itself. “The major stumbling block for all the various proposals we have considered to create a new global representative body...is the concept of representation itself” (295). They rightfully point out the difficulties in extending a nation-state solution like parliament to the scale of the world (295). Yet their rejection of representation as an aesthetic process cuts into parliaments of any size: they point to the “disjunctive synthesis” inherent to any parliamentary system, because such systems distance the represented from political power at the same time that they claim to connect them. The solution, they suggest, lies in a “new science” of politics that will enable the many to wield sovereignty without intermediaries that disempower them.

Taken together, these arguments reject representation because of the semiotic distance it introduces between “political reality” (to use Ankersmit's phrase from earlier) and the representative body. Despite their differences, arguments like Nelson's, or like

Hardt and Negri's, mark political representation as a fundamental inaccuracy, as a failed mechanism to translate the will of the many into an adequate reflection of so many political viewpoints. As a result, they call for political arrangements that empower individual citizens rather than their representatives. Rather than route sovereignty through a central authority (a parliament, a president, etc.), political authority should be decentralized and distributed evenly across the body politic. For Hardt and Negri, it is the "multitude," whose collective decision making they liken to newer, non-Cartesian models of the nervous system: "thought is better understood...as a chemical event or the coordination of billions of neurons in a coherent pattern. There is no one that makes a decision in the brain, but rather a swarm, a multitude that acts in concert (337)." This "rule of everyone by everyone" (247) ensures that no one subject must submit to the will of another, a feat accomplished through the creation of an all new "way in common" that administers "the legacy of humanity" and can also "direct the future production of food, material goods, knowledge, information, and all other forms of wealth" (310). In other words, the autonomous many must reach a consensus about their global welfare, and the implementation of this consensus will make traditional notions of representative sovereignty obsolete. Biopolitical power has replaced political power. For Nelson, a locally-based citizen democracy ensures that no representative can impose consensus where it does not exist. Imagining democracy as "something we, the people, lead together" (D. Nelson 185) forces local citizens to create and implement their own consensus despite the rough edges and conflicts that might stand in the way. These theories, in short, prize the citizens themselves as the most capable and the rightfully empowered rulers of any polity, whether it be a small town or a global community. Local

points of authority should take the place of centralized power because no centralized authority (whether it be a parliament or a representative like the president) can do justice to “the will of the people.” Like Hardt and Negri, Nelson calls leadership into question and reaffirms the power of citizen energy and deliberation. As a result, however, Nelson’s solution, like Hardt and Negri’s “multitude,” does not account for the practical operations of larger-sized democratic states. Nelson’s work is an instructive caution against the bad habits we have developed in U.S. politics, but she also risks reinscribing another bad habit in democratic thought—leaving the fiction of “the people” relatively unquestioned.

Taken together, these “anti-representational” theories of democracy favor decentralization over the tyrannical “centralization” of power and meaning that they find in traditional schemes of representation. Anti-representational theories of democracy reject political representation because of the semiotic instability of representation itself, because acts of representation will always distort the object they treat. Anti-representational democracy, on the other hand, assumes that political reality does exist (or, under the right kinds of collaboration between citizens, it can be created). Yet in positing such a political reality, anti-representational democracy inherits some of the same problems of the much discredited model of what Ankersmit calls “mimetic representation.” “Mimetic representation,” he argues, assumes that “one can reason from the person represented to the representative without anywhere coming across an element that is essentially new” (34). This “sameness” in modern political thought is often substantiated by “the common background shared by both the representative and the person represented” (34).¹⁶ Mimetic representation therefore relies on this “sameness” to reduce individuals and their choices to a representative. Mimetic representation, in other

words, bases its demand that the representative be a perfect reflection of the constituency in these questionable assumptions: 1) political reality exists, and 2) that reality is knowable, and 3) the representative can translate that reality into decisions. As Ankersmit explains, not every subject has an opinion on every issue, making it difficult to “reflect” the will of that citizen on a given issue. Furthermore, if representatives are supposed to give voice to the diverse opinions of their constituencies, the mimetic continuity between representative and represented breaks down (37). Requiring the representative to reflect diversity ends up removing the representative's own thinking from the process (at the very least, it makes his or her thinking secondary to that of the constituency). There is an irony in this arrangement, because mimetic representation assumes a common background shared by represented and representative. As Ankersmit points out, this leads to a metaphorical “body” that does all of the thinking, and a “head” that does all of the acting (36). Finally, mimetic representation assumes that all subjects' opinions are knowable about a given issue. Yet if these opinions actually are knowable, there is little need for representation. That is, if political reality is knowable, why have representation at all?

The problem with mimetic representation, I argue, is not that the representative imposes a “will of the people” on the constituency that the constituency could more rightly provide by itself. Rather, mimetic representation is impossible because the reality it seeks—“the will of the people”—is a contingent fiction. This tenet of democracy's “shadow theory” goes largely unexamined in anti-representational democracy. Anti-representational democracy attempts to adapt the idealized model of Athenian democracy to contemporary democratic practice in the sense that it searches for political

arrangements that are more proximate to the citizens themselves. While the assembly of Athenian citizens was actually a troublingly exclusive group (no women, many men excluded, no slaves), citizens participated directly in the decision-making process. This “direct democracy” (as we have come to call it) eliminates the problem of representation because it allows the citizenry to speak for itself. While Nelson achieves this directness by reducing the scale of the problems and the decision making bodies that engage them, Hardt and Negri's theory of a harmonized, autonomous “multitude” renders traditional sovereignty obsolete—“the rule of everyone by everyone” means all subjects participate equally in the collective's will. Whether or not these theories of democracy could succeed is a question that falls outside the purview of this dissertation. What I do want to point out, however, is that contemporary anti-representational efforts to reimagine a democracy without political representation create two problems: 1) they assume that citizens can consistently represent their own interests, and moreover, that citizens know when to invest in the collective interest as well as how to pursue those interests through action 2) they condemn political representation as a form of unfreedom because it cannot be adequately mimetic.

What do these limitations mean for the history of literature's engagement with democracy? Declaring that representation should be discarded because it cannot be adequately mimetic not only ignores a complex debate about the nature of leadership and political action, but it also de-sensitizes us to the simple fact that anti-representational theories are attempting to “represent” the body politic in the sense that they offer narratives of their purpose and capabilities. They are themselves efforts to represent “the people,” to locate them and discern their capacity for governing, to see them as their

representatives do not and, in the process, create a fairer, less centralized, and more democratic society. Anti-representational thinkers claim to have discovered or reprioritized some quality or fact of the body politic that has been neglected. Yet rethinking democracy around these neglected qualities (whether it be people's own ability to invest in the political life around them or the collective's networked autonomy) supposedly yields a less centralized politics and more equitable politics. In short, anti-representationalists that call for reduced or zero “representation” carry out political representation themselves in the sense that they offer an interpretation of the body politic. While this double play on “representation” should not be taken as a conflation of the work representatives do with the act of imagining something else, political representation and the literary representation this dissertation studies share a common interest in crafting narratives about the body politic and its viability in U.S. democracy. Whether that narrative tells a story about subjects' opinions on a given issue or the nature of the subjects themselves, it still attempts to render coherent what is not a plainly legible text—the masses of supposedly enfranchised citizens who outstrip the scale of a small democratic assembly. Indeed, to call them “the body politic” is to accept a representation of the citizens as sovereign (another point that is up for interpretation). While it would be naïve to accept in the first place that there exists an essential “people” which all efforts of representation distort (after all, the last several paragraphs have been an argument against this very position), it is useful to differentiate the narratives created about this ultimately unknowable horizon and that horizon itself. I will call this horizon “the masses.”¹⁷ Anti-representational theories want the masses to speak for themselves, but this is an impossibility outside the narratives we circulate about the masses, including the

narratives about their ability to speak for themselves. It is therefore simplistic to dismiss efforts to “speak for the people” as merely dominative, for any interpretive activity imposes meaning on the otherwise meaningless.

I complicate this admittedly small sample of contemporary theories of democratic practice by applying a different sort of analysis of literature and politics. There are three major currents in literary studies of “politics in literature” that are worth identifying and differentiating from the approach I take in this dissertation: studies of identity, cultural studies of the masses, and studies of “the crowd.” Identity, as we have come to understand it, is an imaginative construct that is always contested and produced by competing narratives of the self and its relationship to larger imaginative wholes. Identity is always inflected by the cultural and the political (ideological), and as such, acts of representation themselves are political because they can consolidate or challenge “dominant” regimes of identity. This basic set of premises has enabled scores of books and articles that examine the implicit political values of a given representation of race, class, gender, or sexuality.

For Garland, Lindsay, and Johnson, there has been no shortage of critical assessments of their politics of representation. Their literary output has, like many writers, been dissected for their participation in identity formation. Without undervaluing this approach, it is important to notice that these analyses of textual politics are insufficient treatments of how literary writing might function politically. This critical myopia leads to two related problems for the study of the early twentieth century United States. First, prioritizing the discursive formation of identity foregrounds “identity” as the crucial issue of any historical moment. Of course, scholars can bring broader historical

transformations and political struggles to bear on their analyses of identity. In fact, such contextual issues—economic and industrial transformations, the definition of U.S. Empire, changes in racial and ethnic population, the rise of the working class, to name only a few—allow literary scholars to locate a “crisis” in identity at any moment in history. Inevitably, these studies lead us back to the same sorts of questions—how are identities formed? How are they contested or resisted? What are the stakes of recovering these possibilities for our contemporary time? This first limitation leads to a second: in the process of tracing identity and the politics enmeshed in its discursive formation, we sometimes lose sight of the literary projects that writers understood to be explicitly political. Vachel Lindsay has been vilified for his colonial advancement of white identity more than he has been studied for attempting to create a genuinely popular art; Hamlin Garland is more often studied for creating regionalist identity than for critiquing the arrangement of democracy and culture; James Weldon Johnson ends up being read more for the subversion of the racial identity he advances than as a lifetime organizer for racial justice. For as many valuable contributions as identity studies have made, they offer only one angle into the study of the relationship between literary writing and politics.

Thus, while the question of “identity” draws on a wide body of theoretical literature and involves the analysis of history, culture, discourse, and ideology, their ultimate focus is the subject and its formation. My approach differs from politically-themed studies of identity because it examines literary writing for its intervention in the basic question of democratic representation. Despite their very different strategies, assumptions, and contexts, the writings of Garland, Lindsay, and Johnson produce leverage the representative capabilities of specifically literary writing toward the problem

of defining and representing the body politic. Their various attempts to envision and represent a “people” (that is, a distributed body of everyday citizens that hold sovereignty) are not always deliberate, but they do stem from a consistent entanglement with the United States’ struggle over the meaning of its democracy.

Cultural studies of the masses recover their literary production and the nuanced political interventions that these texts express. Broadly considered, the work of scholars such as Cary Nelson, Alan Wald, and Michael Denning (to name only a few) examine the literary writing of the masses (variously definable as the working classes, racial subalterns, tenement dwellers, consumers of mass culture) for their rich political imagination and its subsequent impact on the shape of politics and culture. While Marxist cultural studies has made a crucial contribution to scholars’ understanding of culture, literary expression, and the relationship between aesthetic production and political possibility (and indeed, my own methods and sensibilities are indebted to this approach), this dissertation is distinctly different from studies of the cultural production of the masses. I do not engage the material culture of working class or underclass subjects, nor do I take up mass culture or pop-cultural forms. Instead, I focus on the intervention of literary writing on the problem of popular sovereignty in an increasingly diversifying United States. While the issue of political representation does call attention to working class and underclass subjects, I am instead interested in investigating how literary writing might apply its own representational powers to address the increasingly visible representational deficiencies of mass liberal democracy. As a result, the ensuing chapters follow writers that explicitly undertook projects of mass representation through their literary work—Garland’s “Veritism,” Lindsay’s search for the essence of the common

man, and Johnson's bid to achieve African-American citizenship through writing. In each case, these writers responded to the blindness of political representation in the United States. In short, rather than study "what the masses did," I examine how literary writing struggled over the problem of their representation in liberal democracy.

A third trend in readings of literature and politics, and specifically the role masses in democracy, is the focus on the *crowd* as an icon of mass society. Alternately excitable and passive, literary and other aesthetic representations of crowds supposedly chart the possibilities of entrusting sovereignty to "the people." Nicolaus Mills' *The Crowd in American Literature*, for example, argues that the "political actions of the crowd" raise the central questions about democracy as a form of political organization, particularly the balance between collectivity and authority (Mills 5). Crowds similarly hold interest as the site of alienated modern consciousness. Benjamin's theory of "shock experience" in urban crowds likens the person navigating the jostles and jolts of the crowd to Marx's alienated worker, whose repetitive labor trains their body for a limited range of automated responses (Benjamin 174-176). The exemplar of such alienated urban experience is the "man of the crowd" from Poe's identically-titled short story. The narrator pursues this old man through the city of London hoping to understand the secret of his remarkable appeal. In the end, however, the narrator concludes that "'er lasst sich nicht lessen'—it does not permit itself to be read" (Poe 221). Unlike the *flâneur*, the man of the crowd derives no aesthetic stimulation from crowd contact. The crowd holds not allure, but the menace of barbarism and the destruction of "aura" (Benjamin 194).

Other studies have paid attention to the formation of "crowds" as objects of knowledge in the late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Works such as Mary

Esteve's *Aesthetics and Politics of the Crowd*, or Daria Frezza's *The Leader and the Crowd*, trace the discursive construction of crowds (both through special attention to social sciences, crowd psychology, and political thinkers) as a means to chart the challenges of bringing liberal democracy to the masses. Russ Castronovo's recent work, *Beautiful Democracy*, can be understood as a variation on the theme of reading the crowd as the site of democracy's foundational problems. Castronovo points to two conflicting functions of aesthetics in modern society: to either pacify the threatening mob by homogenizing their allegiance to art (everyone can enjoy Shakespeare), or, destructively, to incite the mob into action (mass entertainment stimulates assembled audiences into a frenzy) (15-18). The crowd, and the aesthetics that shape it, "reveal the political terrain of democracy as erratic and shifting" (1). Within the aesthetic theories that Castronovo explores lies a construction of the masses they target as alternately excitable or manageable through artistic stimulation.

Yet to speak of literary representations of crowds, or to examine the psychological, social-scientific, political, or aesthetic construction of the increasingly visible urban multitudes does not address the problem of adapting a representative government to the conditions of U.S. modernity. Such scholarship treats literary texts as the imaginary space for the negotiation of democracy's anxieties about the threat of the masses, or as yet another historical document inflected by its cultural fabric while simultaneously acting back on its context. Crowds do map some of the possibilities of mass liberal democracy. Yet the study of crowds does not exhaust the possibilities for the relationship between literature and democratic politics. Studying a crowd is not the same as trying to find literary interventions into the problem of representation. A body politic is

not a crowd, and while our understanding of the crowd has important ramifications for our belief in popular sovereignty, the crowd is not itself the body politic. This is why literary and social scientific efforts to understand crowds do not address one of the central challenges of democratic politics in the late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—identifying and representing the interests of the sovereign people. Importantly, while the discursive construction of crowds has a crucial impact on the shape of politics, it does not exhaust the possible functions for literary writing in politics. A *crowd* is not the same as a polity, however the assumptions about the former influence the understanding of the latter.

IV. By “the People”

In the first chapter of this dissertation, I examine Hamlin Garland’s regionalist aesthetic of Veritism for its engagement with the problems of representing communities of interest. Following William Dean Howells’ scheme of a “Republic of Letters” filled in by regionalist representatives, Garland’s writing aimed to democratize representation of the various peoples living across the United States by distributing cultural authority to an idealized “common people.” Garland’s embrace of “region” as the organizing principle of representation—which he set in contrast to the authoritarian cultural centers of the east—also recast the fictional “community of interest” that comprised representative districts as an aesthetic response to the land. Various regional styles, then, created perimeters around their own kind of representative territory. In addition to treating his well-known volume of short stories, *Main Traveled Roads*, as well as his collection of critical essays, I also read two of his less-recognized political novels—*Jason Edwards* and *A Member of the*

Third House. These readings demonstrate Garland's insightful view of democracy's discontents as well as his innovative (yet often naïve) literary solutions.

Chapter two studies the case of Vachel Lindsay, whose efforts to meet the people "face to face" began a career-long effort to create a genuinely popular aesthetic for poetry. Lindsay's attempts to discover and represent the masses, however, ran aground as he dealt with the realities of catering to mass audiences. "The Congo," the poem for which he is most remembered today, became a sensational hit that he tired of reciting. Lindsay often complained that his audiences misunderstood the poem, but this complaint could just as easily be levied at today's scholarly readers as well. Critics reject "The Congo's" racialized utopian fantasies without considering the poem in the broader arc of his career. Though clumsy and naïve, the poem's racial imaginary is less interesting as an act of colonial or racial violence than as part of a career-long project to discover and circulate a unifying popular aesthetic. Lindsay's most inflammatory poem was also enmeshed in his mass politics because his naïve conception of Africans' uniform attachment to rhythm and primitive art served as a blueprint for the nation-wide commitment to art he hoped to cultivate in the United States. In short, Lindsay used the apparent certainty of essentialized racial identity to suggest one solution to the problem of forming and knowing a "people." As Lindsay wore down from his social explorations, he adopted a primitivist aesthetic of "hieroglyphics" that, in his thinking, finally revealed to him the unifying essence of "the people."

The third and final chapter traces James Weldon Johnson's politics of racial uplift. Beginning with an account of black autobiography's politics of representation, and then moving to a consideration of Jim Crow racial epistemology, the chapter confronts

orthodox views of Johnson's race politics—and indeed, the politics of using “race” itself—with the representative claims his writing stakes to the project of African-American uplift. Johnson, in fact, had a unique perspective on the U.S. color line and its implications for citizenship. Johnson lived in Venezuela for years while he wrote most of *The Autobiography*, and the text is informed by the nation's racial politics. While Johnson initially praised a multi-racial society without Jim Crow, he came to fear a “raceless” solution that would occlude African-American culture and identity. Embracing the concept of “race,” then, allowed Johnson not only to use the familiar codes of constituent representation in liberal democracy, but also to confront the racist definition of citizenship that both U.S. and Venezuelan politics sustained in their own ways.

Reading these writers opens up a new space to explore what Dahl calls the “shadow theory of democracy,” the “assumptions and premises that uncritical advocates have shied away from exploring, or in some cases even openly acknowledging” (3). This dissertation studies literary writing that considers some of the blind spots that constitute the shadow theory. The problem of locating a common consensus across the body politic that could authorize government as “popular” bleeds into literary writing that attempts to define and speak for a segment of the body politic. Both representative literature and representative government require acts of imagination and interpretation to establish the fiction of “the people.” It is tempting here to assign positive or negative judgments to the different versions of this fiction (and the people that produce them), to tell a story of heroic resistance to hegemonic discourses of “the people,” or to create a damning account of how those in power narrate their own authority by imposing an unfair notion of democratic citizens. Either of these accounts could make compelling studies. My aim in

the chapters that follow, however, is to suspend the political judgments we often make as twenty first-century academics about the racist, classist, heteronormative, or otherwise oppressive effects of texts from the past. By reserving judgment, I hope to focus the attention on how these writers mobilized literary aesthetics and the expectations surrounding literary genres to solve a question that has haunted the Republic since its foundation: who are the people?

NOTES

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1. Thoreau, Matthiessen asserts, “came as close to the status of proletarian writer as was possible in his simple environment.” Whitman, as “the son of a Long Island farmer and carpenter,” belonged “[most] completely to the life of the common man” of any of the authors examined in *American Renaissance*. Yet even though Hawthorne, Melville, and Emerson originated from more privileged class backgrounds, Matthiessen reassures the reader that “the families of all others [...] were in declining circumstances.” Emerson and Hawthorne grew up in poverty or social obscurity after the death of their fathers, and Melville’s family afforded him little help when he had to enlist as a sailor during the panic of 1837. Because these diminished class origins situate each of the five authors firmly in the common fabric of the democratic populace, these artists’ connection to the common man heightens their powers of social observation. See Matthiessen 78.
 2. The authors and works that Matthiessen included in *American Renaissance* were not at all his personal invention. Instead, he connected an already developing literary history to the ideal of democratic art and expression. Matthiessen was more interested in

rewriting the existing narratives in American literary history than creating his own *ex nihilo*. Matthiessen himself contends that the authors he has selected for *American Renaissance* have already been popularly elected by “the successive generations of common readers” as the most significant American writers (American Renaissance XI). See also Cheyfitz’s study, which also finds Matthiessen’s chosen authors among an already popular set of writers. The immense success of Matthiessen’s work, he argues, owes less to the volume’s originality and more to its “ability to consolidate by focusing what was already the growing consensus of this largely white, male, middle-class, and Protestant-oriented audience” (Cheyfitz 349). Though I agree with Cheyfitz’s assertion that Matthiessen worked against the background of a pre-existing consensus about the composition of the American literary tradition, Matthiessen’s political commitments and the political currents of the 1930s demand an alternative explanation for Matthiessen’s choice of method to engage literary history.

3. See Gunnell 14-15.
4. Orr quotes the McCain publicity team: “While he’s clearly his own man, so far Joe has offered some penetrating and clear analysis that cuts to the core of many of the concerns that people have with Barack Obama’s statements and policies. Whether its Obama’s willingness to sit down unconditionally with Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, or his plans to redistribute the paychecks of hardworking Americans, there is good reason to question the judgment that Obama would bring to the Oval Office” (para. 18).
5. In this dissertation, I use *demos*, as does Dahl, to refer to the enfranchised citizens supposed to have the power to govern, not to refer to the people in general.
6. See also Wood 471-474, 403-429.

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7. See Wood 374-389, 403-429 on previous democratic mob activities, which were Whiggish in nature.
 8. Similarly, the “age of the common man” inaugurated by Andrew Jackson in 1828 universalized a set of masculine white civic virtues as the foundation of citizenship. See Isenberg 8.
 9. See Pole 150-157.
 10. The public debate over the role and capacity of representatives vs. their electors figured prominently into the ultimate ratification of the 17th Amendment to the Constitution in 1913, which allowed for the election of U.S. senators by popular vote, and not by the state legislature. The 17th amendment pointed to an emerging aesthetic of representation that differed significantly from the eighteenth-century liberal conceptions of citizenship and representative government. In keeping with these political ideals, the Constitution originally provided that state Senators be elected by each state’s legislature. The 17th amendment’s ratification rejected (at least in principle) the republican rejection of sovereignty held by the people at large and tempered it with representative scheme that expanded the powers of the general electorate. Where the Madison and other had seen citizens at large as a body that should not (that is, as a body whose political power should be limited), the 17th amendment and its progressive supporters believed that “the people” who had been rejected as the proper seat of power by the formation of a more powerful national bureaucracy (which, as Wood explains, stemmed the sovereignty exercised by the general people) were now fit to wield more authority over government. Senators were to be less Madisonian and more beholden to the general public will (whatever that was

imagined to be).

11. Croly was aware that idealizing the Western democrat had its dangers because it was a temporary response to temporary economic conditions. He argued that the Western Democrat had to sacrifice “individual independence” for the sake of this “consistency of feeling,” and that the conditions producing him weren't sustainable over time. Instead, Croly sees the Western Democrat as “the most significant economic and social type in American history” (63).
12. Progressive-era literature was also interested in documenting abuses. For further explanation, see for example Groman.
13. Gunnell 18. Gunnell explains that while it might be tempting to seek an origin point or significant intellectual influences, it is better to see “the pluralist vision” as an emerging paradigm for which thinkers provided “an intellectual justification” (105). Thus, even though pluralism would not become a dominant intellectual strain until the 1930s, the shifts that preceded this were evident much earlier.
14. See Gunnell 119.
15. See D. Nelson 10-28. In an earlier work, Nelson used more technical terminology to describe the aesthetics of representation—she positions local “ugly democracy,” or “counter-symbolic representation,” in contrast to centralized presidential “closed symbolic representation.” Although these terms do not appear in the most recent versions of this argument, some of the same basic assumptions about representation apply—presidentialism is bad because it blocks “the people” from exercising the political power and knowledge that she believes they wield. See D. Nelson, “Representative/Democracy.”

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16. This is the very “sameness,” we might say, that makes “relatability” such an important asset for political candidates. How many times, for example, did supporters of George W. Bush repeat the familiar maxim “he seems like someone I could have a beer with?”
17. Certainly, claims to understand and speak on behalf of masses—urban or nonurban—are not new by the turn of the century. Marx's own writing on the proletariat, American and British romanticists' idealization of “noble savages,” and Dickens' and Melville's searching critiques of factory conditions all hinge on a fantasy of knowing the undifferentiated mass for which they speak. Yet the modern masses are different. Not only are they newly situated as empirical objects in a period of increasing scientific faith, but (most significantly) the management of the modern masses becomes one of the most pressing questions throughout multiple aspects of American culture and disciplinary practice. The crisis of democracy, the evolution of social sciences, and the literary forms and genres throughout the period are inextricably bound not just to one another, but to the material transformations toward what we now call “mass society.”

Chapter I: Region and Representation in Hamlin Garland's Veritism

I am a reformer—a radical—a promoter of Democracy and yet the people sustain me in it. I tell you the whole temper of the republic in letters as in politics is changing.

Whitman's prophecies are be[ing] realized.

Hamlin Garland to Horace Traubel, Jan 13 1892

Hamlin Garland first won critical recognition as a writer of local color fiction. His 1891 *Main Traveled Roads* collected a series of regionalist sketches about local life in the Middle West. In these earliest years of his literary career, Garland joined Howells in affirming regionalism as a distinctly “American” art form. For Garland, this “Veritism” (his term for realist local color writing) offered to reveal in letters what he called the “real America” from the “interior spaces of the South and West” (Idols 176). Veritism’s goals, then, were both representative and political—by representing localities that constituted the “real America” over and against the jaded (and Europeanized) literary elites of the East, Garland imagined that his local color writing would call into being a U.S. democracy centered on common people. Veritism’s aesthetics of “commonness” aimed to establish a properly “American” literature founded on a faithful representation of difference. Garland's vision amounted to a literary parallel of representative government.

Donald Pizer’s recent work has effectively outlined Garland’s early involvement in politics. The later 1880s and early 1890s saw Garland apply his agrarian populist radicalism to the field of literary writing. *Main Traveled Roads*, his three political novels

(*Jason Edwards, A Member of the Third House, A Spoil of Office*) and his collection of literary and cultural essays (*Crumbling Idols*) define a period where Garland used literary writing as a means to advance his political causes—the Single Tax, land reform, and feminism.¹ At the end of the 1890s, Garland turned away from both local color writing and his populist agenda. In literature, Garland began a period of writing popular Western romances. In politics, he mostly focused on Native-American land ownership. Pizer and others have persuasively explained Garland’s turn from regionalism to romance.² The changing political climate, Garland’s own manipulations of the literary market, and the inherent problems of writing popular literature help to explain why Garland the author might have moved away from his earlier focus on politics and Veritism.

This chapter, however, is not concerned with Garland’s turn away from local color fiction. Instead, it rethinks the politics of regionalism using Garland’s early political literature as its case study. Regionalism, as Stephanie Foote has claimed, was interested in “representing non-normative communities or cultures to a national audience,” likely with the intent of “assimilating new kinds of people within the narrative of American identity,” and “making sense of foreigners.” The differences that marked the political, economic, social, and cultural landscape of the United States at the close of the 19th century meant that American identity was contested, and regionalism was an important arena of cultural production where these differences were staged for consumption by a national audience. We know, then, that regionalism was interested in the question of what it saw as essential “Americanness” or American identity. What this chapter aims to consider is how regionalist literary aesthetics could be read as an effort to resolve the emerging problems of popular sovereignty and representative government at the close of

the 19th century. Garland attempted to write a distinctly “American” popular literature during a time when early 19th century foundational assumptions about democratic society—the sovereign people, the central government, and geographically manageable interests—were challenged by historical change.

Regionalism, I argue, offered a unique opportunity to imagine solutions to the problems of representation and popular sovereignty in democratic government. In short, regionalist literature could simultaneously imagine a representable, sovereign “national people” at the same time that it could make sense of difference within the body politic through the concept of “region.” Garland’s vision for regional literature, then, maps the challenges of democratic organization in the 19th century on to a model of literary production that offered to both find “the people” as a coherent national entity and manage the differences that might threaten that coherence. The “state” had been a fleeting fiction now impossible in modern life, but regionalist writing offered to establish popular sovereignty in the realm of literary art. The collapse of “state” and “government” into synonyms threatened to divert sovereignty away from the “people,” but Garland’s regionalism restaged the 1776 Revolution by wresting artistic authority from the tyrannical (and English) “central academy” and placing it in the hands of “ordinary people.” The nation’s political interests were becoming increasingly multiple and geographically diffused, but the concept of “region” and “locality” buttressed the myth of coherent communities of interest and their manageability under a national agenda. More broadly, Garland’s earliest Veritist writing invites a reexamination of the regionalist genre’s engagement with questions of representation and sovereignty in the late nineteenth-century United States.

In this chapter, I study Garland's political novels and regionalist sketches from the early 1890s for their bearing on the questions of popular sovereignty and political representation. In the first section, I take up the question of defining and representing the national people that emerges in Garland's writing. Veritism, as we will see, offered to a decentralized scheme of representing American life that broke with elitist concentrations of cultural authority. This democracy of culture, for Garland, was necessary because the "average man" of the American public had evolved greater capacities to be both an audience for a literature of the common *and* the object of such a literature. Garland's evolutionism underwrote his vision of the literary and political future in the United States. I use two sketches from *Main Traveled Roads* to show how Veritism eschews the nostalgic tones of other local color fiction in favor of depicting the progress of the average man. There are, however, unresolved contradictions about the capacities of the public that Garland explicitly champions in his nonfictional writing and the practical difficulties of governing on behalf of the sovereign public. His early political novel, *A Member of the Third House*, dramatizes the contradictions inherent to the notion of popular sovereignty in the face of the realities of legislative corruption. In this chapter's second section, I focus on the concept of "region" that emerges in Garland's fiction. Region, I argue, is a strategy for creating coherent groups of politically similar citizens by recognizing their shared difference from other geographical zones around them. Region, in other words, uses that difference that members of a locality supposedly share to make them into a legible community of interest. At the same time that region indicates a spatial grouping of interest, I explain, it also suggests an orientation towards life that spans regional difference. What I will call a "regionalist orientation" combines the aesthetics of

Veritism (its appreciation of nature, local custom, and immediacy) and Garland's moral fixation on sympathy, simplicity, honesty, and integrity into a model of interpersonal relationships. The regionalist orientation, as we will see, reconciles regional difference by simplifying the question of politics. *Jason Edwards: A Story of the Average Man* explores the condition of the American worker in both industrial and agricultural contexts. The problems facing workers of the different regions of the United States, the novel suggests, can be reduced to a single issue in national policy—the Single Tax. Flawed as its solution may be, the novel attempts to envision a “regional” solidarity that can unite the plurality of regional interests under one political goal. Ultimately, the political imagination of Garland's Veritism foreshadow later theories of democracy that attempt to resolve the same difficulties of locating the sovereign people and managing difference within the body politic.

I. Imagining and Representing the Body Politic in Literature

When William Dean Howells envisioned in 1901 a “republic of letters where all men are free and equal,” he distilled decades of his thinking about Realist genres of writing and democratic politics (882). As other critics argued, Howells saw Realism and its related genres as an opportunity to render diverse American groups legible to one another through fiction—a collective endeavor that “would not only help to democratize the field of literature, [but] advance democracy itself” (Foote 32).³ Realist texts, in short, could act like political representatives. A good Realist text, like its governmental counterpart, should faithfully and accurately represent the life and experience of its constituents. Writing fiction for Howells was thus fundamentally a task of just

representation, and of facilitating dialogue between the ideological, racial, regional, and ethnic factions that were emerging in the United States in the closing decades of the nineteenth century.

Howells promoted Garland and other regionalist writers because he believed their style of regionalist writing would help make the increasingly diverse U.S. people better known to one another. Garland's literary and political goals are roughly consonant with Howells' vision of the Republic of Letters. However, Garland's particular thoughts on regionalist writing and democracy complicate the project of using literary texts to address the increasingly visible shortcomings of U.S. popular government. Garland's writings on culture, art, and politics (both published and unpublished) are worth exploring because they allow us to specifically situate his intellectual influences within the historical milieu of the late 19th century's political transformations with regard to the body politic. What exactly was Garland's ideal of the body politic? How did he see literature contributing to popular sovereignty? These questions point to how Veritism could apply to the problems of democratic government.

Garland's thinking about national literature and democracy were heavily influenced by his interest in social evolution. Garland most admired Herbert Spencer's social Darwinism, not because he believed in a capitalist survival of the fittest, but because Spencer's belief that society naturally evolved toward a beneficial social complexity⁴ meshed well with Garland's overall theory of artistic progress. As Garland explains in the final essay *Crumbling Idols*, "literary power is not personal; it is at bottom sociologic." He means that "The power of the writer is derived from the society in which he lives...When society changes, when his audience dies, the writer's power passes away.

This is the natural law” (184-185). For Garland, the natural evolution of social makeup therefore necessitates the evolution of artists who create new art for new social configurations. If art is derived from the society in which the artist lives, then an always evolving society demands a dynamic set of artistic standards to recognize the new representations that the “sociologic” writer produces.

Another of Garland’s favorite intellectuals, Hippolyte Taine, steered his thinking about popular national art toward the physical realities of region. Taine, as Keith Newlin explains, believed that “heredity and physical environment shape the individual and his or her temperament, and that these influences vary from people to people. Moreover, the physical distinctions of climate, location and social customs create a dominant character for a given national literature” (Newlin 157). For Garland, as we will see in a later discussion of his theory of region, Taine’s ideas allowed him to posit *locality* as an important determinant of community characteristics, individual personality, and political issues. Importantly, however, Taine’s emphasis on what Garland would call “region” and regional character allowed Garland to crudely (and polemically) divide the nation’s political and artistic personality between the creative “interior” of the country and the conservative “East.” The “real America” existed outside the urban centers of the east coast, along with its conservative literary circles and stultifying universities. The literature of democracy, for Garland, was the literature that not only captured the life and experience of the “average man,” but also was literature whose value was determined by the average man rather than elite critics (Garland, *Idols*, 91).

By “regionalizing” the standards of literary judgment and the aesthetics of its subject matter, Garland introduced an alternative politics of representation couched in

decentralizing cultural authority. As Utz Riese writes in her analysis of Garland's Veritism, "The genteel attitude postulated a close relationship between the representation of reality and the representativeness of the represented as well as the representing subject." While Garland (as Riese shows) was unwilling to abandon the idea of "truth" in literature, the aesthetics of Veritism allowed "particularized truth claims" under the universal umbrella of Veritist style (Riese 49). "What we should stand for is not universality of theme" writes Garland in "Local Color in Art," but "beauty and strength of treatment." In other words, what's "universal" in national literature is the treatment of subject matter, which can and must vary to reflect the indigenous experiences of artists from different localities. Local color writing is a universally available method, but its representative results are as different as the writers and subjects that constitute the "average man" across America's expansive territory. "Local color in a novel," Garland explains with emphasis, "means that it has such quality of texture and back-ground that it could not have been written in any other place or by any one else than a native" (*Idols* 64). Unlike the universalizing genteel standards of the East, local color writing speaks as the authentic representative of a given locality, but only for that locality. Taken in aggregate, the mass of local color fiction could produce a composite image of everyday life inaccessible to Eastern aesthetics. National literature, for Garland, means a literature accurately expressive of national life (*Idols* 3-5).

Garland's Veritism parallels the basic representative impulse of Howells' regionalist Republic of Letters. By moving the apparatus of literary representation closer to a fictional horizon of "the people," by aligning the literature of the United States with the everyday life of the United States, these regionalist fantasies aim not only to

democratize literary production and literary standards, but also to build democracy itself by consolidating the body politic into a coherent, representable object. Howells argued in one of his *Atlantic* columns that: “no one writer, no one book, represents [America] because that is not possible, our social and political decentralization forbids it, and may forever forbid it. But a great number of very good writers are instinctively working to make each part of the country and each phase of our civilization known to all the other parts” (Garland, qtd. in Foote 32). Only a federation of writers working collectively, Howells seems to suggest, can assemble an aggregate representation of the U.S. and its people. Garland likewise embraced literary decentralization as both a reflection of the variety of American life and a necessary means by which to cultivate a more democratic society. “America is not yet democratic in art, whatever it may claim to be in politics,” he claims in “Provincialism” (*Idols* 8). Garland connected the growth of literary centers and the decentralization of taste (particularly the erosion of centers like Boston and New York) to the rise of democratic government more broadly. In an unpublished book chapter he wrote in the later 1890s, Garland claims: “The supreme movement of the age - nay of *all* ages has been the rise of the people, the growth of the average personality and the widening of sympathy” (“Evolution” 5). Decentralizing American letters also means cultivating the “average” people. “If the past was feudalistic, the future will be democratic...And fiction will embody these facts...If the past was the history of a few titled persons riding high on obscure waves of nameless suffering humanity, the future will be the day of high average personality, the abolition of all privilege, the peaceful walking together of brethren, equals before nature and before the law. And fiction will celebrate this life...” (*Idols* 46-47). The Veritist fiction that Garland envisions will both

“celebrate this life” and help to bring about the transformation of society toward the dominance of “the high average personality,” “the abolition of all privilege” and “the peaceful walking together of brethren.” By democratizing the cultural authority formerly concentrated in the elitist centers of the East, Veritism as democratic literature offers a future of democratic life for the average man.

Garland’s evolutionism, then, underwrote his vision of the literary and political future in the United States. In an unpublished book chapter called “The Evolution of American Thought,” Garland makes the case for the progressive evolution of literary standards according to parallel transformations in culture and politics. Whitman, in Garland’s interpretation, is the poet of democracy not because he was loved by the people, but because he treated “democratic” subject matter—the modern everyday life of the “average man.” Whitman’s “tremendous faith in the common man” is reflected in his concern for the conditions of modern life instead of the romantic past: “It follows naturally from his love and admiration of the present that he should be first of all a realist. He believes that all American art and literature should be founded upon the actual...He spent a third of a century studying men and their occupations and wove them into a vast song...” (“Evolution” 12). Importantly, in Garland’s analysis, Whitman was ahead of his time—a visionary who understood what was democratic about American life before everyday Americans themselves had evolved the ability to celebrate the present instead of the romantic past. The social whole, however, is evolving “in Altruism and in heterogeneity of powers” as the “average of personality” becomes “higher and higher.” The result, argues Garland, is an average mind ready to accept the “new literature which shall have to do with the ideals of the American people.”

This argument about literary taste and aesthetics is also an argument about the nature and function of literature in democracy. If it is the case that “the average American” is ready to see what Whitman saw—that “the true has become the beautiful”—then the new American literature will (according to Garland’s circular logic) will feature what is most “true” about American life: the average man. “America as I conceive it is but another term for Democracy, its literature in the long run must be for the average man and keep in the main that level.” In other words, Garland claims that the time has arrived in the evolutionary history of the American people when the masses of the people can recognize beauty in themselves and in their everyday lives, and properly American (and democratic) literature must comply with this reality. Where it might not have been popular before, literary representation must now turn its attention to the advancing body politic, the everyday life of its evolving everyday people. Garland felt he was championing Whitman’s project into the twentieth century by intertwining the democratization of the public mind with the democratization of literary tastes.⁵

In the global view of U.S. political history, Garland adapted the social and aesthetic theories of his day to the problems of democratic organization that emerged in the late nineteenth century. Specifically, his theory of democratic literature and the average person of democracy can be productively contextualized within contemporaneous debates about U.S. popular sovereignty. Garland’s struggle both to theorize the coherent body politic against the increasingly visible social, ethnic, economic, and geographical differences of the 1880s and 1890s and to create a literary apparatus that could adequately represent this body of people aligns him with the contemporaneous debate about the organic “State.” As political historian John Gunnell

has argued, the end of the 19th century saw political science reevaluate one of the basic problems of democratic organization in the U.S. context: the myth of the sovereign “people.” The challenge of locating the democratic “people” was inherent to the foundation of the republic itself. Gunnell notes: “While it was assumed that a republican or democratic regime required an identifiable and autonomous people, it was at the same time difficult, after the Revolution, to specify any such entity in the American polity.” On the one hand, anti-federalists believed that representation should be virtual because the people did exist, but only in homogeneous localities. Representatives could “virtualize” the political will of manageable, small communities of interest. On the other hand, federalists rejected virtual representation in favor of institutional self correction. That is, they argued that no body of representatives could adequately serve the sovereign will of the body politic because that entity was impossible to represent. They did contend, however, that a kind of sovereignty would emerge from a system of checks and balances built into the representative branches of government (39). We can observe that both federalists and anti-federalists end up deauthorizing the central government in their respective attempts to locate the body politic: if the people are only representable in small communities of sameness, then no national government can be authorized by a collective national consensus. If, however, there is a “national people,” its makeup is so vast and varied that no federal government could claim to be its representative (38). We might think of the problem in these simplified terms: for representative government to be legitimate, the sovereign people could not be national. For the sovereign people to be national, representative government could not be legitimate.

Thus, early debates about the concept of the “people” in democracy revolved

around a paradox that continued through the late nineteenth century and into today's political discourse: the government could not possibly mirror the people on such a large scale, and therefore it could not be sovereign. But if sovereignty rested outside the government and instead with a "separate and intelligible entity that, speaking with majority voice...both created and authorized government," then where, as Gunnell wonders, could this "people" be located amongst the mass of individually interested persons or the classes, coalitions, and factions that emerged within American society (38)? Furthermore, if the "people" held sovereignty, what would the role of representatives be, and why were representative parliamentary structures necessary? (40).

American political discourse has since wrestled with these foundational contradictions in the theory of popular sovereignty. One nineteenth-century response to this challenge was the notion of the organic "state." In the specialized discourse of politics, Gunnell explains, "the State," did not signify "government" (as we assume in today's language), but the organic and locatable community that preceded and authorized government. In this formulation, government acted as the agent of the State's will (60-65). Proponents of the "State" wanted to "give theoretical ground to the claim that...there was in fact one American people that was sovereign, and constitutive of and represented by all the forms and levels of government" (65). In the twentieth century, Progressives would attempt to cultivate a body politic, and Pluralists would retheorize the nature of popular sovereignty as a collection of competing interests. By the end of the 19th century, however, the "State" as an organic and coherent national people became more difficult to sustain in the face of the social, political, and economic changes that mark the historical moment of regionalist writing.⁶

The history of political science is admittedly an incomplete gauge of 19th century intellectual history. However, it is a useful point of comparison because American political science, like Garland's regionalism, shared a commitment to "the people" as the foundation of their respective practices. While political scientists of the 19th century looked for some essential unity that would identify the sovereign foundation of uniquely American democracy, Garland's regionalism assumed that American national literature must be based on a discoverable national people who, despite regional variation, were spiritually similar (Gunnell 97-99). His exhortations towards "truth" in literature are simultaneously assurances that everyday American life is a real object that means something to different audiences. Garland's vision of a literary democracy, then, implements the 19th century vision of Statist politics into the world of literary production and critical consumption. Previous attempts to align writing about the people (like Whitman's) with the people's taste had faltered (partially) because conservative critics shaped literary standards toward the dead classics of the past rather than the vibrant life of the present. Under Veritism, the everyday life of "the people" could at last take the center stage of cultural value. Literary writing, undertaken by the regionalist artist, would bring the neglected experiences of "real Americans" to the attention of readers across the nation.

As we will see, Garland's attempts to represent "the people" in writing brought its share of contradictions, especially as he tried to imagine a concrete relationship between elected officials and the national public. Yet the literary structure he proposes replicates the basic paradox of popular sovereignty. In Garland's analysis, elitist and conservative literary aesthetic standards that dominate American taste stem from the "East,"

particularly Boston and New York. Garland claims that these centers of “domination” stifle the creative vision of localist artists, and they enslave taste to European styles: “A criticism which stands for old things, we repeat, is not the criticism which is to aid the production of characteristic American art. America is not to submit itself to the past; it is to be free” (*Idols* 172). By revolutionizing literary standards, Garland launches a metaphorical second war of independence, this time against the Europeanized “East” and its conservative thinking. The independence gained will be an independence from the oppressive structures of literary governance, which (like their British predecessors) do not adequately represent American life. Garland's comparison is sloppy, but the motivations behind it are telling. If the foundation of the American republic introduced a paradox about the existence of “the people” who had been installed as sovereign, the parallel foundation of a literary democracy introduces a comparable paradox about the relationship between subject matter and critics. If critical standards had stifled the literary expression of “characteristic” Americanness, then where could this “Americanness” be located? That is, by invoking the mythology of popular uprising against a non-representative elite, Garland also invoked an ideal “real American” had gone unrepresented. Where, then, could these “real American's” be found, and how could they be represented?

What emerges from Garland's writing (whether he intended it or not) is a literary solution to a political problem. His theory of regional fiction applies a genre of literary writing to the foundational paradox of popular sovereignty and democratic representation. In so doing, this “Veritist” Republic of Letters sidesteps the pitfalls of parliamentary representation. A parliament of regionalist writers that circulate their

representations through the reading public can incorporate a limitless number of regions into a single forum for processing their differences. The democratic problem of scale—that a representative body becomes less effective as its numbers grow and the capacity for deliberation decreases—matters less in the regionalist effort to represent the national people because a literary print sphere can always accommodate more writers and more texts (at least in Garland's mind). If the “State” as an ideal of coherent organicism had become more and more difficult to defend as the model of popular sovereignty, Garland's regime of Veritist literature recast the trope of the organic national people through the machinery of regional writing. A national government might not be able to legitimately claim to represent a national people that is so riven with factional difference and regional variation. But a print sphere of regionalist writing can claim to represent a national people because (in theory) it is produced by and for a limitless number of average citizens.

II. Evolution of the “Average Man” as the Subject of Democratic Literature

Garland's early sketches rely on a binaristic construction that separates authenticity from artificiality. These conceptual groupings associate the agricultural mode of production, industriousness, individuality, and good ethical/civic values with the kinds of “authentic” Americans the stories display. On the other hand, “artificial” citizens are those who prey on the productivity of others, who have no qualms about exploiting their fellows, and who place no special value on work. This construction of the world borrows Populist conceptions of economic value and the misuse of political power. Garland, after all, openly admired the Grange movement and later the Populists.⁷ Beyond their

reiteration of key Populist talking points, however, I want to consider these early sketches for their approach to representing underrepresented groups. Conventionally, regionalism marks the passing of local peoples into history because they have increasingly less purchase on the modern world. Yet for Garland, regionalist writing was an opportunity to explore the future of democratic art by decentering the critical apparatus and democratizing literature's subject matter—the “average man” whom, as we have already seen, should take precedence in literary art and in political matters. The early sketches, then, provide insight into how Garland constructed the body politic as the convergence of two currents of thought—the average man as the foundation of political sovereignty, and the average man as the rightful subject of democratic literature. If a goal of the later Progressives was to establish a “governmental machinery which would be widely responsive to the electorate” (Gorman xiii), then Garland aimed to create a literary machinery that would respond to and represent an electorate he thought had finally evolved into a condition where Whitman's dream of democratic literature—an art both about the people and enjoyed by the people—could succeed.

While some of the sketches in *Main Traveled Roads* strike a nostalgic tone in their treatment of Midwestern peoples, there are others that capture a body politic evolving into coherence and capability. “God's Ravens” narrates the nostalgic return of Robert Bloom to his boyhood home in Bluff Siding, Wisconsin. Enervated by city life in Chicago, Robert quits his job at the newspaper and relocates his family. Yet the text stages Robert's paradigmatic regionalist effort to capture a bygone moment of rural life as a failure of his representative strategies. “his heart turned back to nature and to the things he had known in his youth, to the kindly people of the olden time. It did not occur to him

that the spirit of the country might have changed” (Garland, *Main Traveled*, 305). Robert assumes that the regions of the U.S. correspond to time-spaces relative to industrial modernity. In his temporalized scheme of space, Bluff Siding still exists in the world of his memory. He anticipates that a return to the conditions of his boyhood will regenerate his failing health and provide him with the material to write literature about “the good simple life of the people in Bluff Siding” (308). Yet the inspiring “simple life” of the townspeople eludes his search for artistic inspiration much in the way that the “natural” surroundings fail to restore his health. In his attempts to locate an essence of small town life, he ignores Veritism’s dictate to write about life “face to face.”⁸

The text consistently characterizes Robert’s search for truth as the failure of a generalist aesthetic. While he understands the local people as an abstract population—“he could be generous toward them in general”—he cannot reconcile his schema of human behavior with particular examples—“it was in special cases where he failed to know them” (313). Robert perceives complex codes of local life where there are in fact much simpler rules. For example, when Robert’s frustration begins to show, he laments “I haven’t lived in one of these small towns since I was a lad. I have a faint recollection that introductions were absolutely necessary. They have an etiquette which is as binding as that of McAllister’s Four Hundred, but what it is I don’t know” (314). Robert imagines that the text of local life is indecipherable, and blames his failings on the complexity of the object we wishes to know. Yet the text belies this assumption almost immediately when Robert admits “The *boys* are perfectly at home” (314). The difference between the boys’ behavior and Robert’s is that the boys treat their new neighbors with natural ease rather than the nervousness of the overeager analyst. Robert could learn from this

contrast, but he stubbornly continues his search for the rural ideal. As his frustration peaks, he calls the people “caricatures” and their town “a caricature like themselves” because “they degrade the nature they have touched” (318). His desire to become “one of them” (316) blinds him to the basic human connection he could share with his neighbors. Only after Robert is reduced to his sickbed does he begin to connect with the people of Bluff Siding. When his needs are reduced to food, rest, and care, Robert more comfortably integrates into local life. Still, his ideal of “knowing” the people falters: “Oh I understand you now. I know you all now,” says Robert to his friend William. Yet William “did not understand him,” and simply moves on with the conversation (323). The crux of Robert’s struggle in Bluff Siding is his inadequate aesthetic of representation—“knowing” as an exercise of deep understanding fails to glean the commonalities of life that a surface-based “Veritist” aesthetic could better appreciate. In the end, the parting words of Robert’s colleague at the Chicago newspaper ring true: “You’ll find men and women just as hard and selfish in their small town way” (308).

In his attempt to discover the past in rural Wisconsin, Robert only finds boring everyday life. Because he is so intent on a nostalgic recovery of his boyhood, the mundane differences strike him as a mind-numbing litany: “‘Taters, fish, hops; hops, fish, and ‘taters... This life is nerve-destroying!’” (318). As he explains the townspeople’s “behind-the-times” way of life (313), Robert signals the advance of American modernity. “There are a great many Welsh and Germans and Norwegians, living way up the coulies, and they’re the ones you’ll notice. They’re not all so.” None of the townspeople he encounters, however, are identifiably ethnic. Garland felt comfortable writing about Norwegians, Welsh, and Germans in other sketches. In “God’s Ravens,” their absence

signals Robert's failed representational efforts. Locals like McTurg and McLane aren't presented as ethnic types, but as people assimilated into village life. The waves of immigration that characterized the land of Robert's boyhood no longer stand out in the form of ethnic enclaves. While the people of Bluff Siding are agricultural laborers who lack the marks of urban culture or white collar work, they are not frozen in the past, nor are the forces of industrial modernity threatening their existence. This depiction of rural life is consistent with Garland's view of the American public as the object of literary representation—a body of people whose everyday life is increasingly more attuned to the present rather than the past. And while the people of Bluff Siding are not the “average man” whose rising standard Garland touts in his chapter on Whitman, Robert's aesthetics of nostalgia misrecognize the poetry of everyday life as a caricature of a pastoral ideal.

Garland's story neither sentimentalizes the rural life of Bluff Siding nor does it lament the arrival of modernity. Instead, it describes a harmony between city and country, where the country's commitment to local community tempers the misguided urban perspective on life. “A 'Good Fellow's' Wife” tells the story of an entrepreneur from the East named Sanford who opens Bluff Siding's first bank. While he begins his tenure in the town as a well-respected, industrious citizen, the instability of capital eventually betrays him. After two years, Sanford loses the bank's total holdings on a bad investment in “copper country.” Notably, however, the text refuses to villainize Sanford and the exploitative, capitalist intrusion that he represents. On the one hand, both the townspeople and his wife recognize that the community's wealth has been stripped away and gambled as part of a financial system that no one but Sanford understood. While everyone else naively believed that Sanford had kept all the deposited money in the bank

itself, Sanford must explain that he has invested the money, lost it on speculation, and is now unable to repay his clients. The text does punish Sanford for his sins—he becomes ill, he loses esteem within the community, and he compromises the trust and affection of his wife. Yet on the other hand, the text refuses to side with Mrs. Bingham, the exemplar of Bluff Siding's provincial suspicion of modernity who immediately senses that Sanford is a thief.

In order to redeem Sanford and the forces of modernity he represents, the text narrates a compromise between Jim Sanford and his wife Nell. Unlike Sanford, who wears a “derby hat and neat suit” (330) and who harbors an “inherent moral weakness” (346), Nell is a “farmer’s daughter” (346) defined by the “iron resolution and Puritanic strength of her father” (349). When the bank busts, Sanford’s first impulse is to leave town on the next train. Nell, on the other hand, starts a general store and vows to repay the bank’s losses to Bluff Siding’s citizens. The text thus sets up a tension within the marriage that is emblematic of relations between rural town and urban modernity; Sanford’s model of business and expansion lacks the integrity of America’s foundational Puritanism grounded in agriculture and hard work. Importantly, Sanford does not choose to leave his family. He does, however, assume a different role, both within the community and in the eyes of his wife. Nell earns the respect of Bluff Siding for her hard work in the general store. Her promise to repay the bank's former patrons resonates with the town’s sense of honesty and hard work. “The keen-eyed young fellows had spread her fame all up and down the road. She had captured them, not by beauty, but by her pluck, candor, honesty, and by a certain fearless but reserved camaraderie” (370). Nell’s business venture differs from Sanford’s because deals with real goods and visible labor. Her

general store can only repay the \$11,000 owed to the people at a rate of \$500 per year, but her efforts have restored the family's respect in the community. Even Jim, who works as an insurance and then cash-delivery agent, discovers the merits of working for his living and, in the process, regains some of the people's esteem (367). Eventually, a windfall from copper country gives Jim and Nell all the money they need to make good on their debts. Yet the influx of cash cannot reinstate the old relations within their marriage, nor does it signal the return of the bank's reckless lending practices. "I want a partner in my store. Let us begin again, right here. I can't say that I'll ever feel *just* as I did once—I don't know as it's right to. I looked up to you too much. I expected too much of you too. Let's begin again, as equal partners" (376). This "getting married again" (to use Jim's phrasing soon after) rehabilitates the failed practices of capitalism by transplanting entrepreneurial energy into a productive context that prizes value created by labor. Importantly, the story does not drive out the Sanford family, nor does it see them becoming farmers instead of business people. Instead, the compromise position—two equal partners running a store, Jim's recommitment to his wife on new terms—figures a broader reconciliation of depersonalizing capitalism and the intimately personal relationships of the rural community. Evolving in microcosm, Jim and Nell figure the broader advancement of "the average personality" and its ability to create viable solutions to the problems of modernity.

III. A Member of the Third House: the Duty of Representatives and the Failure of the Public

Garland's evolutionary understanding of the body politic is important because it

shifts his relationship to local color's human subject matter. The project of representing the peoples of non-urban localities becomes explicitly political when one understands those peoples as the fabric of an evolving national body, and not as a pastoral ideal passing into historical obscurity. Where Whitman's art fell upon an audience that could not appreciate an aesthetic of the present, Garland's art will resonate with a public that has since evolved. As we have seen, Garland's fantasy of an evolving literary public parallels contemporaneous political fictions about cultivating an engaged, unified body politic in the face of "the State's" declining plausibility. Where progressives believed that education and policy could create a coherent body politic, Garland for a time saw regionalist writing as a strategy for simultaneously representing and producing a national people prepared for modernity.

The textual politics of Garland's early regionalism, however, are troubled in the face of practical governance. As a mechanism of representation, the regionalist sketch resolves the problem of democratic scale inherent to the parliamentary governments of nation states. If anything eroded the possibility of a coherent public whose will could be virtualized in the legislature, it was the sheer magnitude of difference across space. The regionalist sketch eschews the problem of organic coherence by foregrounding a unifying aesthetic of the observable and the present. The coherence that Veritism discovers is a universal appreciation of difference within a shared aesthetic. This strategy for managing difference appeals to a reading public whose minds would be shaped by a more empirical understanding of life in the rural margins of the U.S. Veritism edifies and balances the parliament of its imagined audience's minds. It reduces stereotype, decentralizes cultural authority, and distributes Americanness across the space of the nation.

If Veritism's emphasis on representing the local through an infinitely expandable number of sketches resolves (at least in part) the limitations of scale in parliamentary democracy, it remains unable to translate its expanded understanding of the body politic into a program for popular governance. Garland's only novel of political intrigue—*A Member of the Third House*—explores the failures of representative government alongside the failures of the national public to assume sovereignty. Where local color writing examines the local scene that it expects the reading public to assemble into a coherent vision of the "people," *Third House* focuses on the legislature itself as they deal with the problems of interpreting public will and reconciling it with the welfare of the republic. The novel tells a tale of corruption and intrigue in Congress. It illustrates the failures of the U.S. system of representation through its depiction of the "Third House,"—a parasitic organ of legislative activity that accompanies the two houses of legitimate legislation, the house and the senate. These members of the Third House are lobbyists. The novel traces the struggles of Wilson Tuttle, an upstanding young Senator who courts the daughter of Lawrence Davis, a railroad millionaire. Davis' company, the Consolidated Railroad, is pushing hard for a corporate contract to produce railroad lines for a national railroad. Predictably, Tuttle's rival in his courtship is Davis' chief assistant and lobbyist, Tim Brennan. The players in the romantic triangle are conventional, with Tuttle filling the role of modest and intellectual hero against Brennan's dashing and handsome and manipulative villain.

The novel maps the disconnect between popular government and the people themselves through the organization of the legislature and business. Helene metaphorically figures the body politic; her naïveté, particularly her susceptibility to

Brennan's manipulations, parallel the public's finicky, easily misled nature. Like its portrayal of Helene, the novel's presentation of the public emphasizes its finicky, easily misled nature. Tuttle's commitment to representative integrity clashes with Brennan's self-interested pursuit of monopoly for the company he represents. Tuttle eventually restores integrity to the legislature through a special investigation into the Consolidated's lobbying efforts. Yet the return of honest service to "the people" in the legislature cannot repair the more troubling faults of democratic government that the narrative exposes. The hero wins the day, and he gets the girl, but the novel's resolution feels incomplete, both in terms of the characters' relationships and in terms of the politics of representation it advocates. Evelyn complements Tuttle better than Helene, although Tuttle chooses Helene anyway. The novel ends abruptly with Davis' suicide. Neither does the novel produce any solutions to the political problems it throws into relief. Tuttle trumpets the rights of the "public," but, to return to the *Federalist's* paradox of the body politic, the public he locates does not seem capable of governance. How, the novel wonders, can the people themselves become more enfranchised in a political climate designed to manipulate their interests and outlooks? What does good representation look like in democracy?

By staging a conflict about the duties of political representatives, the novel encounters the impossibility of organic "State" unity—that is, a coherent, engaged, and legible body politic. One of the novel's key plot lines follows the temptation and redemption of Senator Ward, who has fallen upon financial troubles and, in desperation, entertains a bribe from Brennan and the Consolidated. The scene of this temptation sets the basic terms of a debate about the sovereignty of the body politic. Ward initially

defends the importance of restricting corporate monopolies, because such monopolies jeopardize public interest in the long term. He concedes that even though the Consolidated could offer cheaper fares and better service, it is worth it “for principle” to “hedge the power of these great monopolies” (Garland, *Third House* 54, 53). According to Ward, “the people demand” that the legislature curb the power of monopolies. In making his argument, however, Ward confuses the “will” of the people with the representative’s judgments about their welfare. Naively, Ward suggests here that “the public” share his concern for the long-term consequences of too much corporate power. Of course, as we shall see below, the narrative presents the public as ignorantly disconnected from the affairs of “the State.” Brennan counters Ward by pointing out the gap between public will and the legislator’s political judgment. The public, he says, “wouldn’t know a principle with a damned bell on it,” and they “demand that its legislature shall bear all mistakes. They’ll demand a bill they don’t see the effects of, and then down their representatives for carrying out their will. The public be damned!” (54). Because the sovereign public are incapable of governing, it falls to the legislature (and the powerfully wealthy) to make decisions about their welfare on their behalf. Even Ward must acknowledge the public’s incapability in the face of this argument—he pauses in anguish and concedes “Tha’s true, in a measure” (54).

Brennan’s position transforms the concerns of republican virtue (that the body politic’s inability to look after itself necessitates virtuous men capable of stewarding their welfare) into an argument for capitalist paternalism. Private companies like the Consolidated are the ones equipped to manage the public good because they are not shackled by public accountability. Davis echoes this line of argument later in the novel as

he continues to pressure Ward's vote on the railroad bill. "But you senators ought to see that we're the only men that can build the road...No other arrangement can serve the people as well...If you're working for the people's good, you'll work for us...There's no other point of view for you, as a representative of the public" (129). The institution best able to administer the public good is, according to Davis' logic, a private company. Private intervention is necessary, suggests Davis, because the public itself is short-sighted and cannot choose the policies that will best serve its interests. "The public can't see ahead. They don't know what's the best thing to do. If they did, we wouldn't find it necessary to do this" (130). Although Ward and Brennan argue about the substance of the people's will, they do not question the role of the representative as a leader and steward of "the people's good." Brennan's interest in "what's the best thing" for the public is of course an effort to sugarcoat his self-interested profiteering. Brennan, and the Third House for which he stands, masquerade as stewards of the public because that is the nominal mission of the representative organs they bribe and manipulate.

The novel focuses on the Consolidated charter, then, because this transaction throws the viability of popular sovereignty and representative government into question. The Third House does not only institutionalize private privilege over and against political representatives who serve the sovereign public—it also amplifies a basic contradiction in the U.S. political structure. How can popular assemblies really represent "the people" if the assembly includes a parallel representative assembly made up of private interests? The debate over the Consolidated charter is a debate about the nature of U.S. democracy because the Consolidated threatens the notion of a unified sovereign "public" by introducing the possibility of competing interest groups—the very factions that Gunnell

identifies as obstacles to the Federalist's vision of the national people. In short, the novel reprises the difficulties of representative government faced by late 18th century constitutional framers.

The idea of the private charter with the Consolidated Road further complicates the concept of a unified public because it introduces a conflict between “private” and “public.” The novel’s railroad monopolists are struggling over *vested right*—that is, rights vested in a private company to provide a public service. At the heart of the debate about vested rights is a concern about protecting private citizens from the public government, which supposedly ruled in the people’s interest. The novel’s drama inherits a basic irony in U.S. legal history—that “private” rights vested in commercial entities were designed to protect individual citizens from “the people” themselves. The idea that private citizens needed protection from a republican government was “extraordinary,” in the words of GS Wood, to the world of late 18th century politics that saw the development of the U.S. constitution. The answer, notes Wood, was the courts, which could interpret the science of laws as they protected private citizens from the actions of the villainized public government. This also created public and private spheres of “government” against “rights,” respectively.

For the Framers, there needed to be some venue to protect the people from the legislature, since the legislature was, in Wood’s words, no longer the solution but the problem. The novel’s emphasis on the “Third House” shows just how contradictory such terms had become at the end of the 19th century. If courts were meant to adjudicate between public government and private rights, then monopolists’ entry into government through lobbying represents a subversion of the federalists’ founding logic (at least if we

read it optimistically). If private corporations are “individuals” (as corporations would later be classified) who possess individual rights against the public government, then they (at least logically) violate that status the moment they take on the status as representatives of public constituency. The Third House is so called because it is the court of collected representatives of financial interests—a parallel representative structure to the Senate and House. No citizen has both the protection of individual rights *against* public government *and* direct power in public government simultaneously. . In the words of Tuttle’s friend Radbourne (himself a former Senator): “Many a well-meaning lawyer or merchant comes into this world, intending to serve his people and not monopolists, but he loses his grip on right and justice” (70). The Third House therefore short-circuits the legal division between public responsibility and private rights. On the one hand, because these lobbyists represent “private” corporate citizens, they are sheltered from the powers of the representative assembly. The extraordinary idea that citizens needed protection from their own representatives becomes in Garland's novel (and in the question of vested rights) an even more extraordinary practice of granting corporations significant autonomy from public authority.

The novel idealistically models the restoration of parliamentary integrity as the restoration of sovereignty to the people. Yet as a legislative drama, the novel cannot itself describe *what* “the people’s” collective sovereignty might look like. Tuttle and Ward repeatedly invoke the duty they owe to “their State” as elected officials, but the novel only presents the public collective through the sentiments of newspapers, encounters with strangers, and speculation (“Now the public will be behind it” says Tuttle after his investigation moves forward). In fact, as the anonymous third-person narrator explains in

a rare moment of reflection, the sovereign people are nearly helpless against the Consolidated's dealings:

The easy-going, habit-mastered public is disorganized, nerveless, wordy and with little energy or concert of action, but the evil forces of society are always organized, always alert, and move as one man. It is the exceptional case where they can be caught off their guard, or surprised in a moment of relaxation (115).

The State may be sovereign, but it cannot organize or defend itself against threats to its power without the intervention of individuals like Tuttle and Ward. The bravery of the novel's heroes, combined with the binding force of the Attorney General's investigation into the Third House's dealings, rescue the public from the grips of monopoly, but do not remedy the foundational problem the novel exposes: in a nation that should be popularly governed, "the people" cannot protect their interests by themselves. Instead, they rely on the virtue of elected representatives and the power of the court to interpret the law. While the people's interests have won the day, the people themselves are no better able to exercise the power they supposedly wield against the alert and organized "evil forces."

The romantic plot resolution that doubles the political victory seems tragic, and even threatening. As he does with the support of the people, Tuttle wins Helene's love. Yet not unlike the public, Helene is not a sympathetic character—she is naïve, superficial, and ultimately unsatisfying as a partner for Tuttle's brooding intellectualism and sober sense of duty. Ward's daughter, Evelyn, makes a much better match. The imperfect marriage between Tuttle and the public seems even more troubling in the context of Davis' suicide and Brennan's escape. The penalty of the Consolidated's defeat falls

unevenly on Davis rather than Brennan, the character who masterminded the bribery of Senators in the first place. Significantly, this unjust distribution of consequences ensnares Tuttle as the family's new patriarch. If anything, the novel's ending figures the burdens of identifying and building a relationship with the voice of collective sovereignty.

IV. The Concept of Region: Communities of Interest and the Regionalist Orientation

What we have seen so far is that Garland's earliest (and most popular) forays into local color writing engage with an unsolvable problem of epistemology by substituting a solvable aesthetic problem. If the pitfalls of popular sovereignty become clear in *A Member of the Third House*, then Garland's aesthetic of Veritism becomes all the more appealing. Rather than worry about finding a coherent author of power, Veritism shifts the focus of democratic political organization to a style of democratic "seeing" focused on local, immediate, and simple. Democracy under Veritism, then, is less a system of organization than it is an aesthetic of the common that implies (only vaguely) a method of actually practicing democracy. A key part of his implied solution to democratic problems was Garland's concept of "region."

In this section, I will argue that Garland's writing developed the closely tied concepts of "region" and "locality" to address the problem of an incoherent body politic. As we have seen, Garland's early political writing posited a coherent national public of "average men" who were both legible to the veritist writer and the capable audience of higher literary standards. The very ideal of "commonness" created an imaginary group of citizen-readers united by a shared condition of living—average, everyday, and common. Local color fiction could represent this evolving public because it called for decentralized

standards of literary excellence. If the local and the common became the standards of excellence, writing could multiply alongside local variation as a representative enterprise, and gradually the public would become more known to itself. If Garland's treatment of the body politic aimed to solve the problem of national coherence, "region" and "locality" attempt to recover geographically delineated nodes of political interest and identity. That is, the tropes of "region" and "locality" in Garland's writing imagine that variation in human values and experience can be mapped geographically (both in the sense of space and physical landscape). Exploring this imagination of the local helps us to understand how Garland balanced the challenge of creating national coherence (that is, the challenge of relocating the organic "State") with the challenge of preserving locality as a meaningful concept of political organization. In other words, where the concept of the common mass of Veritist readers and writers salvaged the model of a national public, the language of locality and region attempted to recast geographical variation as soluble and legible units of political identity.

Like the composition of the national body politic, the difficulties of defining a political locality can be traced to the Framer-era debates about representation. As political scientist Andrew Rehfeld has argued, the task of dividing democracy's constituency into geographical districts called into question the nature and function of political representation itself. The same challenges about managing interest groups and factions in a national system of representation appear in models of local representation as well; if the constituency is overly homogeneous, then its agenda is dominated by the interests of one faction, while an excessively heterogeneous constituency complicates the process of finding consensus. Contrary to many contemporary political thinkers' arguments, Rehfeld

argues, the framers created representative districts as a strategy for limiting the power of one faction over another. In other words, the various boundaries that delimited pieces of the constituency were never intended to mark off what he terms “communities of interest”—groups of citizens who share political priorities. Instead, Madison and others created territorial divisions in constituency because it would a) reduce the influence of powerful interest groups and b) encourage deliberation within the territory.⁹

The actual intent of the Framers is less useful here as an evaluation of how representation “should work” than it is helpful to identify a pervasive trope in democratic thinking that has persisted despite facts to the contrary—the “community of interest.” However elusive such a reality may be within the established framework of territorial representation, the imaginary “community of interest” is tied to important fundamental assumptions about how democracy and mass organization should work. A deliberative community (in contrast to a community of interest) aims to directly incorporate as many participants as possible into discussions and votes about political issues. Yet because the deliberative community invites so many participants from (potentially) so many different backgrounds, it risks pleasing no one. For deliberative communities, the question remains: how can a community be both large enough to drown out the influence of factions *and* small enough to ensure that consensus is even possible through deliberation? The community of interest, on the other hand, sidesteps the problem of difference within the community by making “difference” the community's reason for being in the first place—politically, culturally, and geographically, etc. Rather than welcome variation within a territory (and hope that such variation will lead to a manageable deliberative process), the “community of interest” draws spatial boundaries

around populations according to their *shared difference* with the populations that surround them. Imagining that territorial boundaries also represent a shift between discrete units of political interest therefore solves the problem of mass representation by relocating the deliberative process to the representatives themselves. After all, little deliberation will be necessary within the represented territory since the territory itself is defined by its internal homogeneity. Because the representatives stand in for a homogeneous territory, there is little rift between their agenda and that of the territory they represent. As we have seen, this theoretically enables a responsible virtualization of that community's interests.

Garland's novels and sketches do not often dramatize politics at the local level. His early political writings avoid local deliberation in favor of political solutions from legislative change. *A Member of the Third House*, as we have already seen, places the burden of political action on elected representatives rather than the public. The issues surrounding land value and the Single Tax (popular for the early 1890s Garland) similarly located the problem of politics on to federal policy. In another of Garland's novels, *Jason Edwards*, the local human actors—Jason Edwards and his family who take up a land claim in the prairie West—are beaten down economically and spiritually by the federal laws governing land ownership, labor, and rent prices. These same laws allow Butler to rob the Haskins family of its accumulated wealth in "Under the Lion's Paw." Consistently, then, Garland's local color sketches and political novels route politics through higher bureaucratic levels of policy rather than the work of regional citizens. In their treatment of local people, these writings focus on the unifying principles that make the "region" both coherent and unique.

Garland's concept of "region" assumes that difference in the United States is distributed geographically and organized coherently. "Region" allows Garland's fiction to reconcile homogeneity and plurality in democratic organization because it relates variations in human politics and culture to a uniform relationship with their environments. Regionalist writing does the political work of channeling this relationship into what Garland calls its "utterance":

"California, New Mexico, Idaho, Utah, Oregon, each wonderful locality in our Nation of Nations will yet find its native utterance... This local movement will include the cities as well, and St. Louis, Chicago, San Francisco, will be delineated by artists born of each city... The real utterance of a city or a locality can only come when a writer is born out of its intimate heart" (*Idols* 71-72).

Only the local artist whose "feet will be on the soil," and who takes interest in "the things close at hand" (*Idols* 26, 28) can write the signature art of his locality, whether it be city or country. The map of the U.S., then unfolds as a patchwork-quilt of different localities—California, St. Louis, Chicago, New Mexico, etc.—that are themselves internally consistent enough to produce a signature experience for its artists. The sketches and political novels, as we will see, showcase the quintessential everyday life of each region in an attempt to justify "region" itself as an organizing principle of the body politic. It follows, therefore, that the native writer can voice the locality's identity because he has been produced by it: "a literature as no other locality could produce, a literature that could not have been written at any other time, or among other surroundings" (*Idols* 29). This tautology ensures the authenticity of both of its terms: the

writer has authority because he has been produced by the region, and the region retains its identity because it has been narrated by the writer. The relationship between “locality” as territory and its literary representative therefore create recognizable difference and internal homogeneity at the same time.

The resulting ideal of “national literature” that emerges in Garland’s early writing accommodates this plurality of regional voices as its defining feature. Continuing with the theme of cultural decentralization that appears throughout *Crumbling Idols*, “The Local Novel” explains:

[B]y the work of a multitude of loving artists, not by the work of an over-topping personality—will the intimate social, individual life of the nation be depicted. Before this localism shall pass away, such a study will have been made of this land and people as has never been made any other age or social group, —a literature from the plain people, reflecting their unrestrained outlook on life, subtle in speech and color, humane beyond precedent, humorous, varied, simple in means, lucid as water, searching as sunlight. (74)

Significantly, Garland subsumes the variations that mark the territorial divisions between this “multitude of loving artist” to an overarching commonness shared by all “plain people.” Paradoxically, “region” emerges out of the same material that creates difference and shared experience—“commonality.” The common life that “this localism” treats penetrates to the very core of regional identity—it offers “the intimate social, individual life of the nation.” At the same time, the moralizing overtones and simplistic generalizations that mark this description of commonness—its “unrestrained outlook on

life...humane beyond precedent...lucid as water, searching as sunlight—can be loosely applied to *any* locality. “Regional,” therefore, describes both a geography and an orientation. As such, “region” helps explain (and contain) national difference at the same time that it allows for a binding national solidarity.

This regional model of difference/commonness simplifies the social, economic, cultural, ethnic, political, and geographic tensions that marked the end of the 19th century. One critic has written that Garland ultimately prized difference over any essential sameness he discovered from locality to locality.¹⁰ Yet the question of whether Garland's writing was more interested in sameness than difference (as I have shown above, I believe he was interested in reconciling the two) sidesteps the question of how Garland's writing casts difference in the first place. Foote has noted that “Regionalism was committed to finding a language to express political and social difference in the discourse of cultural variation” (28). Remarkably, the “difference” that comprises the subject of Veritism is mostly apolitical, having more to do with dialect, customs, and work rather than class conflict, ethnic tensions, or social friction. This is not to say that Garland's fiction itself was apolitical—as we have seen, his novels and sketches could be wooden and didactic in their pursuit of a political lesson. Where Garland's fiction narrates contact between regional *difference*, however, it often discovers a common unity despite that difference. That is, the qualities that differentiate regional characters from each other can be overcome by Garland's orientation towards a “commonness” based on simplicity, honesty, and humility.

V. Managing Regional Difference through the Regional Orientation

The sketches in *Main Traveled Roads* once again bear out this model of manageable difference. In “God’s Ravens,” Robert overcomes the regional divide between Chicago and Bluff Siding through the sympathy surrounding his illness. From regarding the locals of Bluff Siding as foreign peoples defined by rural dialect and mundane concerns (“Taters, fish, hops; hops, fish, and ‘taters”), Robert ultimately arrives at an appreciation of both local nature and local people. The sketch’s mix of extravagant descriptions of sunshine in nature with its final sympathetic encounter between Robert and McIlvane echoes *Crumbling Idols*’ language about local commonness. Robert exclaims “Oh God give me strength again! Keep me in the light of the sun! Let me see the green grass come and go” (323). Robert’s illness has reoriented his perspective on the difference that formerly plagued his efforts to fit in—he relates to McIlvane and others through his newfound “unrestrained outlook on life,” and he appreciates them for their “humane” treatment of his illness. Relating across difference, the story suggests, is not a matter of decoding the subtle codes of local life, but looking past such surface variation to the “lucid” and “searching” shared humanity.

“A ‘Good Fellow’s’ Wife,” strikes a similar theme. Sanford’s Massachusetts capitalism threatens to alienate him from both his family and the people of Bluff Siding. As we have seen, the brand of investment capitalism that Sanford brings to town clashes with the locals’ ideals of labor and value. His wife, like the locals, believes that value should come directly from labor and that it should belong to the laborer. The friction between Sanford’s bank failure and the outraged people of Bluff Siding figures the geographic and economic conflict between urban centers of capital and agrarian

communities that produce material wealth. Again, the key to overcoming these regional-economic differences lies with the discovery of common sympathy that contains the actual threats that either side might pose to the other. Sanford's reinstatement into the community is literally a matter of recovering his honesty—he earns back his neighbors' esteem because he finally pays back the money he owed from the bank's failure.

Ironically, Sanford gained the money to repay the bank's clients through the same means that doomed the bank three years before. An old investment in copper country that absorbed all of the bank's resources unexpectedly pays dividends, a turn of events that causes Nell to remark “You didn't—you didn't really earn it...It seems to me just—like gambling. You win, but—but somebody else must lose” (373). The conflict between agricultural producerism and urban capitalism dissolves in a gesture of honesty, of “making good” on a previous promise. In the end, no one complains about where the money came from. As one local explains, “Well, I ain't squealin'...I'm glad to get out of it without asking any questions...We're out of it” (375). Integrity wins the day because it supersedes the threatening conflict of labor and value.

Garland's early political fiction, then, does not so much subsume politics to culture as it makes difference of many kinds secondary to a homogenizing “common” sympathy. The most sustained example of this tendency to manage difference and sympathy appears in *Jason Edwards*. The novel surveys the economic, ethnic, and political differences that mark the late nineteenth-century United States through the perspective of Reeves, the parvenu journalist come to the city who courts young Alice Edwards, and the Edwards family, an Irish immigrant family struggling under the vices of industrial capitalism and land rents. Standing atop the Brooklyn Bridge, Reeves

comments on the inequality of wealth in U.S. society:

I saw men rushing to and fro there in those gloomy scenes, like ants in the scoria of a volcano. I saw pale women sewing in dens reeking with pestilence and throbbing with heat. I saw myriads of *homes* where the children could play only on the roof or in the street. Whole colonies of hopeless settlers, sixty feet from the pavement. And I said, man has invented a thousand new ways of producing wealth, but not one for properly distributing it (Garland, *Jason Edwards* 43).

Reeves sees the urban proletariat, the laboring masses who, three decades later, will be the subject of Popular Front representations of empowered workers. Like the Marxist perspective, Reeves witnesses the incredible productive power of modern society, but marvels at its inability to fairly distribute the wealth it produces. Unlike the Marxist perspective, however, Reeves and the novel at large focalize the question of wealth and human happiness through the promise of free land.

Indeed, despite the text's awareness of large-scale wage slavery and its effects—the ant-like workmen, the sweaty sewers laboring at home, the impoverished children playing on roofs, the squalor of tenement life—it strays away from solutions based on class conflict. Jason Edwards, the so-called “Average Man” that is the subject of the novel's subtitle, works as one of these ant-like laborers in a local machine shop. His walk to work captures the brutal conditions of factories in industrial capitalism. The workers at the furnace, for example, must deal with “heat that would kill a man unaccustomed to it,” a “terrifying flood of gleaming metal,” and a “burning shower” of stray sparks (77-78). Half-naked, “bent like gnomes” (76), and in constant danger of being consumed by the

fiery industrial processes at which they toil, the workmen invoke a Dantesque vision of hellish servitude. These very conditions prompt Berg, Edwards' German socialist friend, to remark “they are not men, they are masshines” (75). Berg's German accent produces a peculiar misspelling of “machines”—“mass hines,” which literally means “masses of peasants.” Yet compelling as the text's damnation of industrial capitalism may be, it retreats from violence strikes. Alice tells Berg to “keep away from those men that believe in dynamite” (55) when Berg offers strikes and violent “brotests” as the answer to their desperate conditions. Edwards dismisses strikes as useless: “No, we can't strike...At least it wouldn't do any good. What can men do strikin' with families like I got? Rent's goin' up, and wages goin' down. I don't see the end of this thing” (56). Berg and his friends represent the possibilities of labor unrest that Edwards (and the rest of the novel) avoid in favor of a different solution: free land. Reeves observes earlier that “the air is full of revolt against things as they are,” but the novel does not concern itself with revolt (42).

Instead of producing conflict, the regional, ethnic, and economic differences that mark the novel's characters are resolved through what I have called a regionalist “orientation” toward immediacy, sympathy, honesty, and labor. The novel ends with Jason Edwards' on his death bed. His efforts to claim and cultivate land in South Dakota have failed after three hard years. The torrential storm that destroyed his farm has also caused Jason to stroke. Yet for all the difficulties that this “average man” must face throughout his life and throughout the story, the text refuses to implicate any party along the axes of difference that it traces—exploitation of immigrants, the friction between the west and the east, or distribution of wealth. Instead, the novel's ending celebrates Jason's life sacrifice and villainizes the systematic problem of land rents. As Reeves looks on at

the enfeebled Jason, the narrator observes: “he could not shake off the feeling that he had been in the presence of a typical American tragedy—the collapse of the working man” (208). Where the machine shop offered brutal conditions of work, falling wages, and rising rents (55), the prairie land claim demands backbreaking labor to increase land values that the worker never sees. As Reeves realizes when he reaches Boomtown to look for Alice earlier in the novel, the land monopolists rent out claims to tenant farmers who improve the land. Yet while the value of the land increases, the return on the farmer's investment does not. Judge Balser, the so-called “land shark” and chief monopolist who holds all the mortgaged land near Boomtown, explains to Alice “We don't want the land...All we want is the interest. We've got more land than we know what to do with” (160). The resulting arrangement reproduces the same urban industrial wage slavery that the Edwards attempted to escape in the first place. Alice remarks, “It's cheaper to let us think we own the land than it is to pay us wages” (161), and Reeves observes “With all this boundless space you are living as closely as in your rooms on Pleasant Street” (145). This homology between city and country channels the various abuses of U.S. industry and agriculture through the single question of rent and property ownership. Everywhere the “average man” goes, argues the novel, he finds rising rents and deadening work that produces wages instead of ownership.

By showing the tragedy of the Edwards family, the novel moralizes about the importance of the Single Tax to remedy the abuse of the American worker. Oddly, however, the Edwards' struggles never amount to local resistance—Jason does not join his neighbors in demanding better wages in Boston, neither does his family fight against Judge Balser on the matter of their mortgage. While the conventions of naturalist writing

sometimes call for crushing and inescapable circumstances, the Edwards's avoid fighting against the local points of their own oppression at every opportunity. Their solution to the problem of urban wage slavery is to flee to the West, but they do so hoping to avoid rebellion rather than as a revolt against the system itself. The family's political passiveness at the local level returns us to our earlier consideration of regionalism and territorial representation. Earlier, I said that the scheme of regionalist difference that emerges in Garland's early political fiction works as both a principle for recognizing geographically distributed human variation *and* as an orientation toward the world. This simultaneous function of "region" relocates politics to the national scale while reducing local conflict to a question of sympathy, honesty, and character. The novel plays out this function of region by identifying a systematic problem of exploitation in the United States without advocating any political activity that could be carried out locally. Nationally, the solution lies in the Single Tax. But locally, all the novel leaves for the battered members of the Edwards family is the solace of the regional orientation.

Reeves' psuedo-eulogy for Jason at the novel's end consoles the family on the basis of Jason's struggle against an abstract "injustice": "He has fought heroically. No battle can test the courage of a man so much as this endless struggle against the injustice of the world—this silent, ceaseless war against hunger and cold...to me, you're a soldier fighting a fiercer battle than the Wilderness—a battle as wide as the world" (210-211). Rather than excoriate the vices of waged life under capitalism, or rage against the exploitative land monopolists who should be overthrown, Reeves couches Edwards' lifelong toil as a "war" against the absolute forces of "hunger and cold." This phrasing subsumes individual struggle against local mechanisms of oppression under a broader

moral campaign against the “injustice” of the world. Edwards, according to Reeves, has done his part as a soldier fighting for justice, but his life has done little to change rents in Boston or mortgage policies in South Dakota. Locally, only sympathy and integrity remain as solutions to hardship. Reeves promises to care for Alice and the Edwards family, and he returns Jason to Massachusetts where he can die in peace. The novel ends by commemorating Jason's life sacrifice and by simultaneously elevating Reeves' chivalrous commitment to Alice and her family. Hailing from a family of farmers himself, Reeves' rescue of the Edwards family shows how a shared orientation toward the “honest,” “true,” “simple,” and “humane” can provide interpersonal solutions to problems imposed by global forces.

Jason Edwards, then, reconciles the problematic of plurality and homogeneity in democratic organization by foregrounding a single economic problem that obtains equally across all regions. Unlike Garland's other works of local color fiction, *Jason Edwards* does not treat a single region and its way of life. Instead, it focuses on the Edwards family's lives from the slums of Boston to the prairie of South Dakota. As the story of “the average man,” the novel is more interested in tracing the experience of the American worker in both industrial and agricultural contexts. Where the city and the country might be thought to be different, the novel reconciles the tensions between regions by foregrounding its producerist critique of the U.S. economy.¹¹ In the city, Jason Edwards complains of rising rents and falling wages for terrible labor. On the farm, he breaks his body to produce wealth that he must pay to the mortgage-holder rather than keep for himself. In keeping with Populist producerism, the novel advocates for an economic reform that allows laborers to keep the value they create. This culminates in

Reeves' faith in the Single Tax, because its underlying philosophy understands that labor creates the value of land and property, and that rents on land and wages for people are imperfect compensation for the value that people actually create. Thus, in the world of the novel, problems as various as free land, agricultural production, and industrial exploitation can all be solved by the Single Tax agenda. More than aligning Garland with Populism, the novel's fixation on the Single Tax solution (and its view of the systematic problem) reconciles the political "difference" that marks regions of the country under one point of national policy. Regardless of other differences in politics, values, customs, or language, the Middle West and the East coast can build solidarity by committing to a national policy that will fix their problems. Rather than render difference in the language of culture, this makes regional variation manageable by showing how their various hardships are attributable to a single point of national policy. At the same time, the text places national politics as the only answer to local problems. This means that region is not the point of political deliberation, but the point of uniformity of experience that can be used interchangeably to justify comparison to support national policy.

VI. Conclusion:

After the early 1890s, Garland abandoned local color writing and its attendant populist politics in favor of more popular romances of the West. While his turn to these formulaic stories made him more money than Veritism ever could (some of his romances became national best sellers), Garland maintained his political involvement on the question of women's rights and Native American rights. As Donald Pizer has argued, the shifts in politics and economy toward the end of the 1890s help to make sense of

Garland's withdrawal from his earlier platform of issues.¹² Garland did not continue his advocacy of literary democracy, cultural decentralization, and the rise of the average personality into the twentieth century. His early forays into the problems of popular sovereignty and political representation, however, anticipate two significant twentieth-century developments in U.S. political thought. Garland's concept of "region" as a coherent community of interest shares the same organizing logic as later cultural pluralist solutions to multi-racial democracy. Randolph Bourne, in his "Trans-National America," invokes metaphors like "tapestry," "quilt," and "nuclei" to explain the spatially bounded enclaves of coherent cultures that must be harmonized by a new democracy. Horace Kallen's famous "orchestra" metaphor similarly groups cultural difference as discrete yet internally consistent human concentrations that can be managed in a kind of parliament of cultures "harmonized" into a recognizable consensus. Regionalism, like the later cultural pluralism, addressed the question of difference within the national people by making "difference" a principle of cohesion that defined communities of interest that were more manageable for a national democracy.

Furthermore, Garland's efforts to recognize and represent a national people through a decentralized, infinitely diffuse sphere of Veritist fiction can be seen as continuous with later Progressive attempts to cultivate a national public where there had not been one before. Where Progressives put their faith in education and expertise to empower the sovereign people, Garland believed that regionalist writing would gradually illuminate, consolidate, and elevate the ever-evolving "average personality." Both Garland and the later Progressives believed that people now were more capable than ever of wielding the power in a democracy.

As for literary studies of regionalist writing, Garland's example demonstrates alternative possibilities for the genre's political applications. The politics of identity have been well explained in studies of regionalism, and studies of literature more broadly. This chapter has modeled a different kind of analysis, one that overlaps an innovative project of representative fiction like Veritism with its contemporaneous problems of representative government. If Garland defined American literature as literature aligned with democracy, then it follows that we should account for the strategies that Garland's writing might mobilize to address the longstanding historical challenge to one of democracy's most prized fictions—the sovereign people.

NOTES

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1. Pizer page xxii
 2. See Foote and Brown. See also Pizer *xiii- xxvii*
 3. See also Bentley 124.
 4. See Pizer xvi
 5. Uncollected letters of Garland to Whitman in Price.
 6. See Gunnell 97, particularly his explanation of Robert Wiebe's argument about individualist democracy and the increase of state power.
 7. On Garland's populism and political interests and influences, see Pizer's introduction to *Hamlin Garland, Prairie Radical*, *xiii- xxvii*.
 8. See *Idols* 94.
 9. See Rehfeld pages 20-30, 45.
 10. See Jordan 89
 11. See Kazin 13.
 12. See Pizer *xiii- xxvii*

Chapter II: “I Have Met Them Face to Face”: Vachel Lindsay’s Aesthetics

At the peak of his fame in the 1920s, Vachel Lindsay was one of the most well-known poets in the United States. Occasionally faulted for lacking complexity or seriousness, the idiosyncratic man from Springfield, Illinois was widely admired for his optimism about the Utopian potential of the popular masses. In his own mind and in the estimation of contemporaneous critics, Lindsay was the successor to Whitman as a poet of the people. Yet today Lindsay is barely remembered in Literature classrooms, not because his works aren’t available (his complete poetry, prose, and letters have been collected and published), but because his career-long aspiration to represent and uplift the popular masses in art is riddled with what seem to be puzzling departures from this professed agenda. This chapter will rethink Lindsay’s career by taking on the poems and thematic shifts that have made Lindsay elusive or unpalatable to contemporary audiences.

Much of the relatively small body of Lindsay criticism splits into two main camps.¹ On the one hand, there are those critics who focus on “The Congo,” a 1916 performance piece widely condemned for its supposedly racist and imperialist perspective on African and African-American life. On the other hand, there are critics who celebrate Lindsay's commitment to the “common people” (along with his progressive, populist, and egalitarian politics) yet turn away from the puzzling example of “The Congo,” or the more drastic shift towards visions and hieroglyphics later in his career. The differing perspectives of these critical camps point to the challenges of reconciling Lindsay with Lindsay: the same writer that condemned racism and preached

beauty as the civic ethic of Utopia, is the same who penned “The Congo's” incendiary descriptions of “skull-faced, lean witch-doctors” (Lindsay, *Poems* 1 174).² The Lindsay who relentlessly championed the everyday lives of common people also shunned recital crowds and turned to a seemingly apolitical mysticism after a 1923 nervous breakdown. How can we assemble a coherent legacy from Lindsay's abundant and well-loved writing in the face of these contradictions?

My aim here is to recover Lindsay's poetry (or at least the critical interest in his work) by renarrating him as a writer vexed by the difficulties of creating democratic art—that is, art that is intended as a representation of the U.S. popular masses. Whitman's example is the archetype here. He claimed in the 1855 preface to *Leaves of Grass* that the poet is “kosmos” (750), a whirling synthesis of the people drawn from his close relationship to them. The task of the democratic poet is to know the people, and in turn, to write poetry that delights their sensibilities and uplifts them. For Whitman, “A bard is to be commensurate with a people (742)” and “The proof of a poet is that his country absorbs him as affectionately as he has absorbed it” (762). Ambitiously, Lindsay saw his own project of democratic art as surpassing Whitman's. “Now Whitman in his wildest dreams,” he said in a 1923 letter, “was only a pretended troubadour. He sat still in cafes...Whitman only *fancied* the crowd. I have *met* them face to face” (*Letters* 298, 300). It is tempting here to accept Lindsay's ideals uncritically because they agree with familiar conventions in our thinking about representing “the people.” That is, it is easy to believe that Lindsay was truly in touch with the masses, because we also like to believe that contemporary democratic politics should do that too (the example of “Joe the Plumber” serves as only the most recent reminder of this myth in U.S. politics). One recent critic,

for example, claims that Lindsay “was not at all naively oblivious to the routine debauchment of the voice of democracy...he refused to confuse the facade for the essence” (Sakolsky xciii).

To accept, however, that Lindsay (or any writer) understood “the voice of democracy,” that he perceived an “essence” of the U.S. public that others did not, and that his poetry contained this knowledge is to simplify a set of assumptions about the artist and the process of representation. Lindsay's claims about his own close relationship to the masses signal less his “commitment to democracy” and more an aesthetic strategy—what I will call his *aesthetic of the popular*—that struggles to give meaning to such an incoherent semiotic terrain as “the people.” Throughout his career, he would revise his aesthetics of the popular in response to the difficulties of finding “the voice of democracy.” The bizarre rhetoric of “The Congo” and the primitivist, visionary shift in Lindsay's poetic themes and styles are adaptations to the challenges of knowing and representing human beings as cultural/political aggregations. Each is part of an evolving set of responses to questions about the nature and representability of democracy's popular subjects. Lindsay took up the same basic question as Garland did in Veritism: is there binding force that gives the popular subjects of democracy some shared sensibilities? Unlike Garland, however, Lindsay's literary project aimed to find a common denominator—an essence—that might inspire a national popular aesthetic.

This chapter will read Lindsay's career, from the early years of his voluntary pauperism to his shift to hieroglyphic visions after 1923, as the story of his evolving aesthetics of the popular.³ For Lindsay, the discovery of a genuinely popular national art form hinged on resolving the same central incoherence of that haunted popular

sovereignty in the early twentieth century United States—namely, the nature and form of the “national people.” In the first section of this chapter, I rethink the portion of Lindsay’s career that critics often celebrate: the early years of voluntary pauperism. Rather than accept the naïve connection between poet and people that Lindsay claims for himself, I emphasize the key assumptions about mass representation that underpin his “democratic” poetry. In the second section, I locate these early aesthetics of the popular in the 1914 “Congo” poem, arguing that the piece is best understood as an attempt to consolidate an object of textual representation along racial lines. Like the rest of Lindsay’s Higher Vaudeville poems, I argue, “The Congo” poses as the focalized voice of a coherent body of citizens. Yet while Lindsay intended “The Congo” to be widely understood, the poem’s primitivist language and visionary structure hinted at the aesthetic strategy Lindsay would later deploy in response to the pestering hordes of audiences that failed to understand his work. The third section treats the failure of his Higher Vaudeville aesthetic. Tired of immersing himself in what he saw as tedious ignorance, Lindsay created an aesthetic of the popular that knew the essence of “the people” in spite of their apparent noncompliance with his Utopian ideals. Lindsay responded by reinventing himself as a visionary seer, vainly attempting to escape the burden of accurate representation through hieroglyphics. A metaphor for the relationship between literal sign and metaphysical signifier, the hieroglyphic offered Lindsay an alternative to direct contact with the masses and marked a prolonged retreat from his popular subject matter.

I. The Early Years

Lindsay began his career with incredible faith in his ability to read and represent

the masses through personal observations and experiences. He shared with Whitman the belief that “the genius of the United States is not in its ambassadors or authors or colleges or churches or parlors, nor even in its newspapers or inventors...but always most in the common people (741).” Yet if for Whitman the “proof” of the democratic poet’s station depended on his “absorption” of the people (who should in turn receive the art of their poet with approval), Lindsay approached this absorption empirically. Like an ethnographer, he insisted on meeting these “common people” directly. Whitman “sat still in cafes” but Lindsay would study these raw “geniuses” by going out among them.

Beginning in 1906, Lindsay carried out a series of ethnographic tours across the United States.⁴ The opening narrative of his 1916 *A Handy Guide for Beggars* demonstrates the importance of face-to-face encounters for his early aesthetic of the popular. Lindsay describes a poor woodcutter and his family take him in for an evening meal and place to sleep. As he often does in his travel writings, Lindsay meticulously accounts for every detail of his experiences, from the minutia of the dinner conversation to the salty taste of the food. Yet the evening’s true importance, according to Lindsay, comes out through poetry. Reading them Yeats, Burns, and Milton, Lindsay matches the poetic expression of his simple hosts. Though no troubadour, the woodcutter tells “the memory of evenings his neighbors had spent there with him, the stories told, the pipes smoked, the good silent times with wife and children” (*Guide* 9-10) through the poetic expression common to all men: the “hints, and repetitions, and broken syllables” of earnest speech (12). Poetry and kindness mingle around the fire, and as Lindsay goes to sleep, he extracts for his readers what he sees as the core of this encounter: “This is what I came into the wilderness to see. This man had nothing, and gave me half of it, and we

both had abundance” (13).

This tropic “wilderness” of common people plays a double role in Lindsay's Utopian doctrine of “New Localism.” On the one hand, Lindsay the poet needed to absorb the sensibilities of “the most common people” in order to create art that would be, in turn, absorbed by them. In the above example, Lindsay learns from the woodcutter's charity and unsophisticated patterns of speech. On the other hand, touring the “wilderness” gave Lindsay the opportunity to disseminate beauty as a civic ethic. In “New Localism,” the foundation of small communities was an everyday dedication to local art. Lindsay called upon citizens to “labor in their little circle expecting neither reward nor honors...In their darkest hours they should be made strong by the vision of a completely beautiful neighborhood and the passion for a completely democratic art” (Lindsay, *Adventures* 17). The aesthetic sensibilities that Lindsay absorbed and represented to his audiences therefore played a crucial social function in the eyes of “New Localism.” In the words of his 1915 illustration to “The Village Improvement Parade” poem, “Bad Public taste is mob law; good public taste is democracy....A bad designer is to that extent a bad citizen” (*Poems* I 259-260). Journeying to the wilderness of everyday people, Lindsay aimed to both learn *what* “good public taste” should be and to cultivate that taste in the people he met.⁵

A latter-day interpreter of Matthew Arnold's politics of culture, Lindsay therefore looked to spread an uplifting “middle” culture that he culled and improved from the common people, rather than insisting on a pre-formed canon of “the best that has been thought and said”. For Lindsay as for Arnold, a stable, healthy society springs from a culture that harmoniously reconciles its “Hebraic” and “Hellenistic” antinomies. Susan

Hegeman's instructive re-reading of Arnold's cultural politics and its influence on the early twentieth century American left is worth repeating here, as Arnoldian culture figures prominently in Lindsay's visions of democratic utopia. Arnold's two cultural categories, revised which Van Wyck Brooks revises as the more familiar "highbrow" and "lowbrow," describe the equally dysfunctional models of culture that have developed, rather than denote (as we popularly understand the terms) a hierarchy of good culture and bad culture. For Arnold and for Brooks, lowbrow Hebraism represented a pragmatic resistance to the aesthetic and the spiritual" that developed in workers or pioneers who had no time for such indulgences. Highbrow Hellenism, on the other hand, was created by "middle-class pretensions to a certain precious refinement," not by elitist cultural mandarins. Thus the cultural politics of Arnold and his latter day interpreters—Brooks and Lindsay—depend on a Utopian fusion of highbrow and lowbrow to create an "authentic" but accessible culture for the many. This is not "mass culture," but a culture whose purpose is to harmonize the social and economic frictions of the nation through a new popular culture.⁶

Lindsay's vision of a harmonious local community was therefore underpinned by popular art derived from a combination of folk elements and Lindsay's own highbrow artistic instincts. The resultant fusion brought culture's social benefits into the everyday lives of citizens. For Lindsay, the New Localist utopia exists in the space shared by humble citizen-artists. For Lindsay, the very substance of democracy is this cooperative production and appreciation. As he describes New Localism, a citizen's "reason for living should be that joy in beauty which no wounds can take away, and that joy in the love of God which no crucifixion can end" (*Adventures* 17). So grounded in inauspicious

common life was the New Localist vision that Lindsay imagined his hometown of Springfield would transform into the first Utopia.⁷

New Localism therefore implies a popular aesthetic of exposition. “The common people,” understood to be a coherent terrain (a “wilderness”), must be confronted by the poet, interpreted for the significance of their everyday practices, and subsequently distilled into more recognizable art forms that could be recited to propagate these sensibilities. Lindsay’s 1914 “The Would-Be Merman” presents this aesthetic of the popular through the metaphor of an ocean’s “surface” and “depth”:

Mobs are like the Gulf Stream,
 Like the vast Atlantic.
 In your fragile boats you ride,
 Conceited folk at ease.
 Far beneath are dancers,
 Mermen wild and frantic,
 Circling round the giant glowing
 Sea-anemones.

“Crude, ill-smelling voters,—
 Herds,” to you in seeming.
 But to me their draggled clothes
 Are scales of gold and red...
 Wisdom Waits the diver
 In the social ocean—(*Poems* 1 269, lines 1-12, 17-18)

Again acting as an ethnographer of everyday beauty, Lindsay reinterprets the overlooked signs of commonness. The “Wisdom” of the “social ocean” is an aesthetic appreciation of the neglected masses. Oceanic and unknown, these masses are the force buoying all other life—the men in “fragile boats” and all others who live without regard for their presence. The masses’ “draggled clothes,” the signs of their commonness, are equivalent to more recognizable examples of beauty (“dancers,” fantastic creatures like “mermen” and “giant glowing sea-anemonies,” and “scales of gold and red”). The basic condition of their aggregation, their quality of “mass-ness,” comprises the beautiful foundation of society invisible to the higher classes.

Importantly, the poem’s speaking voice (closely aligned with Lindsay himself) positions itself as exactly such a “diver.” Simple as it may be to look beneath the surface of the everyday, the poem privileges itself as the expositor of these hidden qualities of common life. You might have known all of this, the speaker implies, had you simply taken the time to look. The relationship between the poem’s speaker and his mass subject matter mirrors Lindsay’s own imagined connection to the “common people.” The material beneath the ocean’s surface is not conscious of its own beauty. The “ill-smelling voters” assume their aesthetic forms only under the appreciative gaze of the poem’s speaker, an artist capable of figuring tattered clothes and bad smells as beauty. Likewise, Lindsay believed it was his role as a troubadour to synthesize and circulate the everyday art he gathered on tour. Without Lindsay’s ability to leaven the overlooked qualities of people’s lives, they would continue to go unnoticed, just as the audience of “Mermen” might not ever appreciate the world beneath the surface without the interpretations the speaker offers. The beauty of democracy may be everywhere that there are everyday

people, but it can only assume the form of art when it is translated by the observer-poet.

Lindsay therefore played the part of the privileged seer, bard of democracy who absorbed “the people” by reading them as a legible text. Beneath the “surface” details, Lindsay believed he saw those facets of life that deserved to be leavened into a higher art and broadcast across the country. The success of his tours hinged on his ability to represent a fantasy of what he took popular sensibilities to be back to his audiences. Lindsay also developed this aesthetic “surface” of the masses in *The Art of the Moving Picture* (1916). In this earliest of film criticism, Lindsay extends and adapts the sense of popular legibility we have traced so far to visual representations of masses. Films (or “photoplays”), he argues, have the ability to capture “the passions of masses of men” (40). Where traditional stage performances powerfully convey private emotion, film’s sweeping camera views can encompass “the sea of humanity, not metaphorically but literally: the whirling of dancers in ballrooms, handkerchief-waving masses of people in balconies, hat-waving political ratification meetings, ragged glowering strikers, and gossiping, dickered people in the marketplace” (39). This sea of humanity is a multitude of particular actors gathered under the camera’s gaze, and their emotions and meaning are not figurative but “literal.” Crowds do not represent the feelings of human aggregates for Lindsay in film; they are actually those feelings.

Like other Progressive-era reformers who studied the underclass for their habits, speech, and nature, Lindsay entered communities of all kinds to gather information for his New Localist. As Toby Higbie explains, these Progressive “outsiders” employed a variety of methods—such as photography, interviews, and disguises—to gain information that they then “reported back to their middle class readership” (561). Higbie likens these

“tramp ethnographers” to “anthropologists who studied so-called primitive peoples” because they often created images of their subjects as the “grotesque” other of middle-class America (561). Progressive tramp ethnographers used their studies to justify further cultivation of the masses because they positioned them as “the main social problem” (584). While Lindsay’s initial forays into the “wilderness” showed none of the disgust or horror that often marked narratives of class exploration, he shared the tramp ethnographers’ desire to pinpoint a widespread social ill and adapt a social solution in response. Lindsay’s first efforts at reform, however, aestheticized the “ill-smelling voters” and attempted to uplift them through local art molded after their nature (a local art that would of course be refined by Lindsay the artist).

II. Representation, Higher Vaudeville, and “The Congo.”

Lindsay's attempt to uplift the public by confronting them with their own refined experiences and sensibilities culminated with “Higher Vaudeville.” An experimental technique in poetry recital, “Higher Vaudeville” put the ambitions of New Localism into practice by condensing folk material into performance pieces modeled after the “lower” Vaudevillian form. While the format imitated mass entertainment, Higher Vaudeville presented the redeeming aspects of “the people” back to Lindsay's live audiences.⁸ Lindsay therefore staked the popular appeal of Higher Vaudeville on his ability to adequately read and explicate his imagined ideal of commonness. As a representative act, a Higher Vaudeville poem-performance claims to speak on behalf of the masses it treats. In so doing, the form constructs coherence out of its subject matter because it assumes the masses can be compressed into sound, rhymes, rhythm and images.

When he was writing it in 1914, “The Congo” was to be the finest example of “Higher Vaudeville” to date. Since that moment, however, it has become the center of critical debate about its racial subject matter. Lindsay intended the poem to be an optimistic prophecy of African-American uplift. Yet the resulting poem is confusing, not only because of its visionary shifts from setting to setting, but also because of its apparently stereotypical racial imagery. There has been no shortage of outrage over “The Congo’s” supposed racism and imperialism.⁹ Instead of dismissing the poem for its racism, however, I want to argue that “The Congo’s” treatment of race is best understood by comparing it to Lindsay’s broader treatment of popular representation in Higher Vaudeville. That is, I’m proposing an explanation that seems outrageous—that Lindsay actually intended the poem, like other Higher Vaudeville pieces, as (what he saw as) a truthful, distilled representation of Africans and African Americans. Certainly the poem failed, both in critics’, and later in Lindsay’s, view. But the example of “The Congo” indicates the loftiest hopes of Lindsay’s early aesthetic of the popular, and it is still valuable because its content and its subsequent infamy disclosed the need for a revised aesthetics. The poem is, in short, the link between Lindsay the troubadour and the Lindsay that would recreate himself in the 1920s as a hieroglyphic visionary.

A brief look at “The Congo”’s Higher Vaudeville predecessor, “The Kallyope Yell” (1913), helps set the precedent for how Lindsay used poetry as a representative intermediary between the imaginary “common people” and live audiences. “Kallyope” refigures the popular masses as a multimaterial, polyvocal collective. Mixing onomatopoeic “fizzes” and “sizzles,” the “Willy willy willy wah hoo!” of exclamatory celebration, and animal noises like “hoot” and “R-O-A-R,” the poem draws together a

rolling cacophony of society's various constitutive elements. The poem's speaker is neither machine, animal, nor man, but a harmonious intermixture of all three. Because this voice whirls up from the social totality, it promises a new cultural energy for democracy:

Born of mobs, born of steam,
 Listen to my golden dream,
 Listen to my golden dream,
 Listen to my G-O-L-D-E-N D-R-E-A-M!
 Whoop whoop whoop whoop whoop!
 I will blow the proud folk low,
 Humanize the dour and slow,

I will shake the proud folk down,
 (Listen to the lion roar!)
 Popcorn crowds shall rule the town –
 Willy willy willy wah **hoo!**

Steam shall work melodiously,
 Brotherhood increase.
 You'll see the world and all it holds
 For fifty cents apiece.
 Willy willy willy wah hoo!

Every day a circus day (*Poems I* 248, lines 45-56).

Fueled by mobs and steam, the Kallyope sounds the familiar themes of New Localist cultural reform. The “golden dream” will “shake the proud folk down” and “humanize

the dour and slow.” The reconciliation of these two cultural antinomies produces an authentic “middle” folk culture represented by the host of circus performers, from the “popcorn crowds” of the aforementioned lines to the “trapeze kings,” “Roman drivers,” “actresses,” and “princesses” that follow in later lines. The swelling spirit of plurality *is* the voice of the Kallyope; it speaks a principle of commonness through the steam-whistle sounds of redeemed mass aesthetics.

Lindsay hoped “The Congo” could similarly compress the experiences of African-American history and culture into the sounds of modern mass life. Early in the poem’s composition, he bragged:

I am working on a Congo piece that will make the Kallyope look like thirty cents. Every kind of war-drum ever heard. Then a Minstrel’s heaven—then a glorified camp-meeting. Boomlay Boomlay Boomlay Boom. I am doubtful whether this stuff is poetry. But I discover a lot of it in me. One composes it—not by listening to the inner voice and following the gleam—but by pounding the table with a ruler and looking out the window at electric signs. Also by going to vaudeville which I have all my life abhorred—I at last grasp what those painted folks are up to....I do not suppose I have ever put so much progressive gradually developing polish on anything (*Letters* 81).

Beating with the vitality of the electric age and popular performances, “The Congo” claimed to have the pulse of the African American folk culture Lindsay so much admired.¹⁰ What Lindsay “grasps” is a sense of African-American representation and its role in the popular culture of vaudeville. But where vaudeville falls short in its minstrel

treatment of African Americans, Lindsay imagined his poem could elevate the vaudevillian show to a sincere, panoramic treatment of the same subject matter.

Indeed, his claims for the poem's ability to represent Africa and African-Americans became more extravagant as the weeks passed in early 1914, ballooning with a letter to Louis Untermeyer where he described it as:

equal parts (1) The death of a Missionary on the Congo. (2) a Cannibal War dance. (3) The Springfield Illinois Race Riots (4) The burnings alive of negroes in the south. 5) The Camp-Meetings of half-Wild Negroes. (6) A Bert Williams Negro Comedy Co. (7) A Minstrel Show. (8) Joseph Conrad's African Sketches. (9) Uncle Tom's Cabin. (10) The Emancipation Proclamation. (11) The Songs of Stephen Collins Foster (12) The Souls of Black Folk by W.E.B. Du Bois. All boiled down and served to a rag time tune (*Letters* 95).¹¹

Lindsay bills the poem as a sweeping inventory of African and African-American cultural practices, their notable appearances in writing, and their key moments across the history of slavery in the United States. Like "Kallyope," "The Congo" paired a popular style of sound and performance (a fusion of vaudeville immediacy and modern rhythms) with a vision of the "real" nature of African-Americans. "The Congo" wanted to leverage its representative powers, its ability to condense so much into something so comparatively compact, to present the audiences of *Poetry* with a non-Western example of a New Localist Utopia.

"The Congo," then, is New Localism gone global, and voices Lindsay's faith in the potential of popular arts not just to redeem Western civilization, but all civilizations. Like

the audiences he hoped to uplift with his poetry, African-Americans were for Lindsay a human clay to be shaped by confronting them with their own folk qualities. The poem's opening section, "Their Basic Savagery," pits the folk Africans against the unimaginative bourgeois materialism of the African Babbits, the "witch men." This distinction between "authentic" Africans and their would-be African oppressors goes all but unnoticed in most readings of the poem. Yet the poem clearly singles out these figures as the stand-ins for the U.S. middle class seen elsewhere in Lindsay's poetry. Like the plutocrats "With dollar signs upon their coats, / Diamond watchchains on their vests" who defeat the populist Bryan in Lindsay's later tribute to the people's politician (*Poems* I 348, lines 199-200), the witch men wear "long-tailed coats with a gold-leaf crust / And hats that were covered with diamond-dust" (176, lines 72-73). "Mumbo-Jumbo" savagery, as the mantra of the witch men, is thus partnered with a dour lifestyle weighed down by conformity, by constant fear of aesthetic enjoyment crossing the lines of conventional behavior: "Walk with care, walk with care, / Or mumbo-Jumbo... / will hoo-doo you" (lines 96-99). The participants in African folk culture must weather the suppression of Africanized "proud folk" (to use the Kallyope's term), a class of the wealthy but culturally impoverished whose sensibilities must be overthrown.

Like the Utopian aesthetic of the popular U.S. masses Lindsay had imagined before, the triumph of "common" Africans paved the way for a total revolution of arts and culture. Even the poem's closing scene, which depicts the salvithic arrival of Western missionaries, echoes other examples of Utopia that appear elsewhere in his works.¹² Like the voice of "Kallyope," "The Congo"'s mash up of image and sound celebrates an accessible popular, a multitude of persons and histories "All boiled down and served to a

rag time tune.” Lindsay’s habits of imagination suppose that African culture shares with the U.S. a folk repressed by materialism, that these folk peoples can be known and voiced through poetry, and that their paths to salvation rest in their liberation through poetry.

Lindsay’s use of “ragtime” to describe “The Congo”’s aesthetic makeup is remarkable if we compare it to his later reflections on jazz music. Ironically, Lindsay saw jazz not as the urban folk art of countless clubs and small venues around the country, but instead as the unnatural, mechanical bourgeois art of hotel lobbies. It is perhaps one of the great ironies of Lindsay’s writing of “The Congo,” and indeed Lindsay’s racial politics more broadly, that he condemned jazz as empty art forms opposed to the other examples of cultural richness he celebrated. In “The Jazz of this Hotel,” Lindsay wrote:

Why do I curse the jazz of this hotel?
 I like the slower tom-toms of the sea;
 I like the slower tom-toms of the thunder;
 I like the more deliberate dancing knee
 Of outdoor love, of outdoor talk and wonder.
 I like the slower, deeper violin
 Of wind across the fields of Indian corn;
 I like the far more ancient violoncello
 Of whittling loafers telling stories mellow
 Down at the grocery in the sun;
 I like the slower bells that ring for church
 Across the Indiana landscape old.
 Therefore I curse the jazz of this hotel

That seems so hot, but is so hard and so cold (*Poems* 2 576)

Strangely, jazz for Lindsay stood against the richness of open-air, natural art forms found among the common people. Ignorance of this African-American cultural medium as itself a popular art form drives Lindsay to pair jazz with the bourgeois refinement he detested: the cheapened music of repetitious, uninspired modern life. In contrast, ragtime's relationship to African-American folk music would seem to make it the ideal analogue to an inventive performance poetry grounded in local practices. The "Congo"'s own phrase, "a roaring, epic, rag-time tune" contains the poem's two ambitions in miniature: the sweeping tale of a people's Utopian destiny phrased in the rhythms and sounds of art derived from the people's existing folk practices.

The NAACP's *The Crisis* condemned Lindsay's poem for its ignorant treatment of African-American uplift. In the August 1916 issue, W.E.B. DuBois rejected Lindsay's primitivist description of African-American virtues ("straight from the jungle") for its blindness: "Mr. Lindsay knows little of the Negro, and that little is dangerous. Chairman of the directors Joel Spingarn wrote personally to Lindsay later in 1916 that "many of them ["colored people"] doubt your understanding of their hopes," and suggested he did not understand "the difference between a poet's pageantry and a people's despair" (*Letters* 134-135). The piece itself, in other words, was insufficient for the task of representation that it had taken up. And while it is beyond my purposes here to engage all race criticism of poem, it is sufficient to say that today's critics excoriate "The Congo" for reasons fundamentally similar to those given by Spingarn and DuBois: as an attempt to represent a non-white cultural group, it trips miserably over its own racist and imperialist assumptions. In short, Lindsay tried to speak for a collective's experience that he neither

understood nor could represent.

I want to argue, however, that “The Congo” fails not simply because it can be read as a racist, imperialist poem. “The Congo” falls short of its representative goals because narrating a fictional consensus of “the common people” involves different politics than creating the same consensus for early twentieth-century Africans and African Americans. The fact that differing political indices are used to judge a conceptually similar operation of narrating consensus helps explain the two critical camps that define Lindsay criticism in general. Lindsay scholars who celebrate him as a spokesperson for ordinary Americans are praising an imaginative act that flattens social variation into a stylized, fanciful, and often absurd consensus of “the popular.” Critics who condemn the racist misrepresentation of “The Congo” reject the poet’s fictional consensus of African and African-American life as out of touch and naïve, as disconnected from a more nuanced presentation of the same subject matter. I am not suggesting that “African Americans” and “the people” are homologous conceptual horizons. Lindsay’s chief shortcoming in writing “The Congo,” in fact, was his assumption that racial identity was interchangeable with folk identity, when in fact the politics involved in each project of representation are different. Thus, while his aesthetic of the popular remained more or less constant, the poetic results of applying it to racial subject matter did not. It is worth considering how Lindsay’s use of race in “The Congo” provocatively aligns the question of racial representation with the task of democratic representation. As Mark Van Wienen writes: “The problem of racist representation that vexes Lindsay’s ‘The Congo’ is, in some measure, a more general cultural problem that bedevils black poets as well as whites. So while we can—and must, given our later

historical context—call ‘The Congo’ racist, we cannot readily dismiss the problems of black representation that the poem so pointedly raises.”¹³ In the next chapter, we will see a more carefully considered adaptation of the politics of representation to racial categories in James Weldon Johnson’s writing.

Lindsay intended “The Congo” as a visionary representation of a marginalized racial minority that would elevate African folk culture as a source of Utopian energy. That this reading of the poem seems so outrageous only marks its failure as an instrument of cultural education. The years in the aftermath of “The Congo” revealed that New Localism and Higher Vaudeville could not succeed as universal philosophies of popular art, and their subjects were not consistent from place to place. Butted against cultural and regional variation, Lindsay’s aesthetics of the popular were exposed as inadequate for the project of “knowing” the people of “any race.” Rather than cultivate a folk-art sensibility, “The Congo” became (in his eyes) a poorly understood but gimmicky favorite that occluded his other poetic accomplishments and contributed to his mechanization as an artist.

III. The Failure of Higher Vaudeville Touring and the Primitivist Solution

Lindsay’s complaints about his reputation and reception in the early 1920’s (which only deepen later that decade) speak to a waning faith in the early popular aesthetic that underpinned New Localism and Higher Vaudeville. The poet who once obsessively pursued face-to-face meetings with “the common people” wearied of unappreciative and uneducated audiences. Lindsay was road-weary and exhausted by the time he collapsed in 1923 and spent several months in recovery teaching at Gulfport,

Mississippi. Lindsay, however, was not merely tired—he never regained the same interest in direct encounters with the masses. Instead, he revised his aesthetic of the popular to navigate around these frustrations. What I term Lindsay’s “Revised Localism” sees him turn his attention away from real live subjects and towards an imaginary “essence” of the popular that he could access without the burden of personal contact.

The mass, uneducated audiences—the men that “think amid the filth” he celebrates in “Dreams in the Slum” (1910-1912)—increasingly exhausted and annoyed Lindsay. Chafing at the prospect of reciting the same old poems and spending more time explaining himself than reading new work, he proposed in 1920 “to develop such a system of recital visits that everyone is *debarred from the hall* that cannot pass a reasonable examination on the *Village Magazine* or one of my books” (*Letters* 205)! Praising the “plain living and high thinking” of English professors later that year, Lindsay ends up opposing his earlier popular efforts. “To meet such tiny flocks of the Elect,” he reasons, “I pay the price of reciting these two poems I abhor—Booth and the Congo, for the larger group” (259). His own innovation, he complained, suffered because of his unwanted responsibilities as an entertainer. “Now I have no chance to write the new invention or court the solitude when it comes out in good form, but I am increasingly tortured by the impulse for daily *new* invention. My suitcase is packed with notes. But I will have to sit still, tied, with my jaw tied, one whole year, before I can write them out.” (259-260).

Not surprisingly, Lindsay’s recital tours from 1919-1923, organized by A.J. Armstrong of Baylor University, sent him to visit more high schools and English departments than family homes or small towns.¹⁴ In an October 1921 letter, Lindsay tells

Abrams: “I do not want people to think I represent Jazz or even a theory or movement of poetry. I want in some sense to represent the honest clean devout young Americans who are courting and studying Browning and saying their prayers on campuses like yours. I disagree with them on the one hand, but on the other hand, I am more naturally akin to them than to any other set of people” (*Letters* 229). In April 1922, while discussing future appointments with Armstrong, he insists: “Remember I still hate Women’s Clubs. Also I will adore the boys and girls of America, in College or High School. These are the darlings of my life” (236). The young and educated, untainted by conventional taste, formed an ideal audience for Lindsay because they could be shaped towards the ends of New Localism without posing any of the barriers (social, intellectual, etc.) of New Localism’s earlier, less-educated subjects.

Lindsay also began to see touring as less the duty of a democratic bard of the masses and more the burden of uniform mass production. Complaining of the schedule he had asked A.J. Armstrong to implement for him, Lindsay wrote to Byner in 1923: “He turned out completely standardized little Vachels every day like Ford Cars—a new well-varnished, guaranteed, noisy, cast-iron Little Vachel in every town for a year and a half, like a whirlwind” (*Letters* 274). Poetry had become a mechanical exercise, a deadening act of unfulfilling labor as disdainful to Lindsay as it would have been to his much admired John Ruskin. In 1925, Lindsay called his life on tour “standardized,” “impersonal,” and overall, “jazzed” (*Collected* xxv). The drudgery of everyday life on the pullman car ironically burdened Lindsay with precisely the experiences he hoped his Gospel of Beauty would dispel from the world. In attempting to cultivate aesthetic culture on a mass scale, he had become an emptied-out instrument of mass production.

By 1923, Lindsay was turning away from woodcutters, mobs of ill-smelling voters, and slum-dwellers (the object of New Localist preachings in *Adventures While Preaching the Gospel of Beauty*). He had rethought the project of mass touring in the face of its practical rigors and the realities of middlebrow popularity. His longing for an “elite” of the educated and appreciative, for less standardization and more personal reflection, marks a clear break with his earlier aesthetics of the popular. Where New Localism was formerly meant to be a program fully accessible to and derived from the common man, the Revised Localism that emerges in these years finds the aesthetic horizon it desires outside the mass audiences of Higher Vaudeville performances and crowded public recitals. We can read the beginnings of this aesthetic realignment from a letter he wrote to Witter Byner shortly after his collapse in Gulfport:

I have been thinking, thinking, about the United States. I dearly love the United States. I have given my heart to thousands and thousands of beautiful people, and I have certainly parted with many a town where I wanted to kiss them all good-by they were so good to me and parting was so hard. But in the end such tears wash body and soul and brain to nothingness—like loving the sea too long. But now I turn to the actual sea for strength and God help me to win it there. I have loved so many noble faces and roaring whispering beautiful crowds I can love no more. I must sleep a thousand days ... I wanted to break like a wave on the Rock of the United States (*Letters* 273-274).

The figurative “social ocean” to be explored for “wisdom” (to repeat the terminology of “The Would-Be Mermen”) has worn away, leaving the metaphor broken into its literal

constitutive parts—“actual sea” and “crowds.” Lindsay’s phrasing suggests that he no longer finds the proper object/audience of popular art in unmediated interactions with the people themselves, but in nature, in “the actual sea.”

This choice predicts a fundamental rearrangement in the structure of the meaning of “the people” in Lindsay’s poetry. The everyday people that were meant to be both the material for and the proper audiences of an edifying democratic aesthetic ignored the message (and the messenger). To continue on as a democratic bard without the burden of inspiration and/or acceptance from the masses, Lindsay relocated the interpretive goalposts, shifting his focus from an ideal of “the people themselves” to an essence ontologically prior to them. Where Lindsay abandoned one metaphorical relationship, he actually introduces another—the “actual sea” transformed from a figuration of masses as the source of Utopian inspiration to a spiritual-natural realm that the visionary Lindsay could find somewhere besides recital halls, town squares, and private homes. Lindsay’s solution to the problems of mass representation was the hieroglyphic, a strategy that we will explore in greater detail below. Importantly, however, the hieroglyphic figured the identity of the common people as a mystically accessible primitive substance. “The Congo,” despite its representative failures, showcased the utility of primitivist discourses for discovering the collective identity of a mass subject. How, then, could primitivism as an epistemology of the masses serve Lindsay’s goals of knowing “the people?”

Generally speaking, “primitivism” does not signal a uniform tradition of thought so much as it points to a diverse history of ideas with a shared (although contingent and shifting) horizon of inquiry—the savage, the simple, the natural, the unrefined and underdeveloped.¹⁵ Romantic primitivists, writes Helen Carr, prized societies at “earlier”

stages of development because they supposed these peoples to be “closer to the truth of nature” and a valuable source of imaginative powers lost in the historical march of modernization.¹⁶ Civilization, despite its advances, had grown to restrain human beings artificially from their more “natural” ways of being, making “primitive” societies an ideal after which Westerners could pattern radical reform.¹⁷ In contrast, as Edward Said indicates, the nineteenth century saw the proliferation of knowledges meant to differentiate European and non-European peoples as part of a wider agenda of colonial domination. All the “arts and the disciplines of representation”—from writing and art to racial theory—allowed European cultures “to make representations of foreign cultures *and* in fact master or control them” (99-100). “The primitive” in colonialist discourse, then, became less a horizon to imitate and more an external menace to be removed, conquered, or reformed.

For Lindsay, however, the primitive had always been a force more internal (shared by all subjects) rather than external (a scary glimpse of pre-civilization that needs to be extinguished or contained). Lindsay’s tendencies are continuous with Mark Thompson’s theorization of “savage modernism.” As Thompson argues, modern primitivism saw the “savage” other transform from a fully external phenomenon to an internal one—that is, the savage became the manifestation of energies and biological tendencies within *all* human beings, including “civilized” Westerners (3). The psychological writings of Freud, as well as Ernst Haeckel’s infamous theory that “ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny” helped buttress the idea that within any given human being is the entire history and physical material of the whole species.

Such a conceptual shift heightened the stakes of primitivism’s projects from

centuries past, which focused on harvesting cultural energy from primitivized subjects and policing the boundaries of identity. While primitive energies were theoretically more accessible, Western civilization would be consequently more unstable because it contained within it the kernel of that which it opposed. Most studies of primitivism in American literature focus on this problem. One recent study of modern primitivism in American literature, for example, defines the primitive as “the dominant culture’s projection of its internal fears, anxieties, and attractions” (Rossetti 6). Part of an agenda of “fear and loathing” (4), primitivist discourse reaffirms the privilege of the privileged class because it is a flexible object, which the dominant culture can alternately accept or refuse according to its needs.¹⁸

Importantly, the question of identity cannot be separated from primitivist attempts to mine inspiration from other cultures. As one anthropologist studying the interplay of Western and “oriental” material culture has argued, “the phenomena of primitivism, as of art in general, are particular forms of the general process by which a society uses techniques of projection and introjection to construct itself as a self-conscious and self-defined category” (Miller 69). For modern art to present itself as a cohesive, critical opposite of society, it must draw on society’s other—the “primitive” (55). To think of a coherent “primitive” is to reinforce simultaneously the identity against which it is positioned. Modern primitivism, then, encounters the other as both a source of artistic inspiration—whose very definition helps refine and affirm the identity of the primitivizer—and as a threat to that identity. Taken broadly, it is a project of imitation and exorcism, a highly sophisticated scheme of mastery that grants recognition of cultural value even as it recognizes the need to dominate that value.

Lindsay's career spans a historical moment, however, when the primitivist imaginary encountered a different domestic "otherness." As we have seen, the massification of society at the turn of the twentieth century saw a culture-wide reconsideration of *how* to extend a liberal popular government to an increasingly diverse and numerous population. As we have seen, the ethnically-diversified working classes, the proliferation of urban crowds, and the solidification of national publics through print increased uncertainty about who "the people"—on whose behalf popular democracy was supposed to govern—actually were. The cultural meaning of crowds, masses, and national publics were changing, too. Robert Nye's historical work on crowd science has shown how intellectuals and politicians took interest in the emerging mass populations they governed. According to Nye, crowd theorists supposed that the "energy" of crowds (and by extension, national peoples in the modern era) were "the unconscious and primitive elements of human nature that have survived the course of evolution, including humankind's most ancient memories and instincts" (Nye 48).¹⁹

"Self" and "other" remain important polarities in this context, yet the conventional separation or containment of the terms cannot explain the impulse in representative political and artistic projects like Lindsay's (or popular democracy through parliamentary representation) to be aligned with the people, to know them and speak on their behalf in some more perfect way. The masses could be seen as a new object of knowledge whose study was thought to resolve the difficulties of organizing a modern democracy. Understanding this other was vital to the task of understanding the popular body politic on whose behalf the U.S. supposedly governed. Where the continuity between primitive other and Western subject was anxiety-inducing in other contexts, in democratic thinking

it becomes a characteristic to embrace because it helps solve the problem of scale in representation. This continuity might serve the foundational assumptions about a government authorized by a popular body politic. It performs, for example, the same kind of work that the myth of the “organic State” does when it rationalizes a spiritual link between representative and national people.

For Lindsay, applying primitivism to his project of democratic popular arts allowed him to reposition “the common” from the *surface* of the social mass he tried to explore to the *essence* of that same body. Lindsay could therefore access the material he needed to create folk art through his attuned imagination instead of the increasingly frustrating lecture tours that confronted him with the unappreciative many. In short, he could create a popular art representative of popular sensibilities without having to engage the “common people” he formerly prized. Primitivist thinking allowed Lindsay the observer to claim to understand the ontological residuum of human objects that his “face to face” empirical study could not discover.

After 1923, Lindsay began to write about his mass audiences and the mass public in general as extensions of more fundamental principles of spirit and nature, mystical substances which the reborn “visionary” Lindsay could interpret through poetry. Lindsay shifted the problem of knowing the people from an empirical struggle with details to a practice of reading supra-lingual symbols. The chief device for accomplishing this mystic detour around the problem of popular mass representation was the “hieroglyph.” The hieroglyphic, as Lindsay developed it in the 1920s, figured the relationship between literal surfaces and more abstract ideals. If “The Congo” dabbled clumsily with the visionary primitivist representation of the African-American masses, then hieroglyphics

more extravagantly positioned Lindsay as a seer peering into the essence defining human groups. The poet, in this scheme, was less interested in discovering particular characteristics of the masses and more interested in seeing beyond them, into the metaphysical fabric uniting humans, nature, and spirit. In short, Lindsay's hieroglyphic was a mature strategy for freeing himself from the burden of deriving representative art from direct engagements with any mass public.

This aesthetic reinvention presents itself clearly in the preface to his 1925 collected poems. Provocatively titled "Adventures While Preaching Hieroglyphic Sermons," (an obvious update to the earlier *Adventures While Preaching the Gospel of Beauty*), the opening essay breaks with his career as a mass-public artist defined by recital tours. Lindsay couched his artistic rebirth as a renewed commitment to the visual and symbolic components of his work. Images, he argues, are the bedrock of his written poetry, not just illustrations of them. "It was out of the drawings and others like them, that the verses were finally born....People talk about my distributing my rhymes. They do not remember that I distributed these pictures with an equal zeal" (*Collected* xl, xlvi). Revising his own biography, Lindsay describes his drawings as a longstanding testament to his connection to Egyptian thought, even if he only explicitly insisted on such a relationship after 1920. "Once I sang the Congo" says Lindsay, but "Long before that I sang the Nile. The forty pictures that are in this book, most of them dated before 1912, are in their own way, a part of the Egypt that is in me forever" (xxiv)²⁰ He later explains how his early work on cathedrals, moon patterns, and censers "might stand for" conjugated Egyptian verbs such as "to strut," "to illume," and "to have vision" (xxix-xxx). Not surprisingly, then, Lindsay reinstates "The Map of the Universe" into his

official body of work by adding hieroglyphics around the drawing's border (figures 1 & 2). This 1904 map, explains Lindsay, "has dominated all my verses since" (*Collected frontispiece*).

Rebranding his work as "hieroglyphic" rather than "written," Lindsay introduced a structure of representation that freed him from the messy engagements with mass audiences that had marked his career as an artist of words and sounds. The precise representational function of Lindsay's hieroglyphics is thus worth some examination, because these mystical scripts are the fulcrum of his renewed thinking about "popular" arts. Quite explicitly, Lindsay draws on the work of Emanuel Swedenborg, repeatedly asking his readers to consult the Swedish thinker's work on hieroglyphics. We can only guess that Lindsay meant Swedenborg's *An Hieroglyphic Key to Natural and Spiritual Mysteries, by Way of Representations and Correspondences*, a dense text that treats the harmonies between the social world, the natural order, and spiritual ideals. Even a basic understanding of Swedenborg's thinking in this volume suggests its appeal to Lindsay. For Swedenborg, there is a correspondence between the spiritual and the natural, where the natural typifies a spiritual ideal: "there is nothing throughout nature but what is a type, image, and resemblance of something spiritual, which is its exemplar" (55). In parallel, he notes a correspondence between "the nature of the life of every individual and that of the community at large" (30). For Swedenborg, all of these elements should be interlinked through an ideal harmony—nature typifies the spiritual, society corresponds to nature, and the individual corresponds to society. The hieroglyphic, then, is a script that marks the threshold between the spiritual and the natural correspondence. They "represented not only natural, but at the same time also spiritual things" (56). This is not,

he points out, to reduce “singulars to their universals” because the natural and the spiritual are not interchangeable substances. Rather, it seems that hieroglyphics are a symbolic script that can capture those pieces of nature which point to transcendent, spiritual ideals.²¹

In adopting this cosmic order, Lindsay reframed his writing’s ability to speak for and understand the mass public by thinking of his works as hieroglyphic keys into the social, natural, and spiritual registers. Thus could he declare in “Hieroglyphic Sermons”:

I believe that civic ecstasy can be so splendid, so unutterably afire, that continuing and increasing with such apocalyptic zeal, that the whole visible fabric of the world can be changed. I believe in a change in the actual fabric, not a vague new outline. Therefore I begin with the hieroglyphic, the minute single cell of our thought, the very definite alphabet with which we are to spell out the first sentence of our great new vision. And I say: *change not the mass, but change the fabric of your own soul and your own visions, and you change all.* See “The Soul of the Spider”...and “The Soul of the Butterfly”....This very precise new beginning for our life something far more than the mere drunkenness of addressing enormous assemblies (xxvi-xxvii, emphasis mine).

To think in hieroglyphics, then, is to understand the interrelation of individual thought and the social world, and the power of natural objects (like the spider and the butterfly) to represent (even typify) this relationship. The fabric of one’s own soul can therefore be an extension of the external world of nature and society. The spirit of the common manifested itself equally in the masses he used to study and in Lindsay, a knowledge of

the other that could also be found in the self. According to this reformulation of the poet's relationship to the popular, knowing society was as simple as knowing himself.

Importantly, however, Lindsay seemed to combine a number of different visual phenomena under the umbrella term "hieroglyphic": 1) A literal Egyptian hieroglyphic, many of which appeared in the illustrations of his poems after this point, or had poems written about them; 2) A poem/image combination, or his visual artwork in general; 3) an ethereal script that appears near or is associated with people or places. Yet as seemingly incoherent as Lindsay's use of hieroglyphics might seem, each of these visual representations conjures the ideal from the ordinary, the spiritual life behind natural people, places, and things that are its type.

Anna Massa's explanation of Lindsay's fascination with hieroglyphics—that Lindsay envisioned hieroglyphics as a distinctly American mass art form, thus seems inadequate on two counts. First, as we have seen, Lindsay's increased fascination with the hieroglyphic corresponds to a period of troubled reflection on the possibility of mass art as he had practiced it up to 1923. Second, this explanation simplifies what was for Lindsay a complete reinvention of mass art through a shift in his representational philosophies.²² The understanding of hieroglyphics that I suggest marks a clear departure from Lindsay's earlier writings on the subject in *The Art of the Moving Picture*, which viewed these scripts more as an Eliotic objective correlative. In a chapter entirely devoted to the subject, Lindsay had defined hieroglyphics as a flexible picture vocabulary ingrained in the basic grammar of films. Lindsay's explanation of each symbol sounds strikingly similar to Eliot's later (and more well-known) discussion of the objective correlative in "Hamlet and His Problems": "a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events

which shall be the formula of that particular emotion” (7). For the early Lindsay, hieroglyphic symbols create meaning by themselves; they are not dependent on context to render them intelligible. In contrast to their later more imaginative function, these hieroglyphics are readily apparent and intelligible to the pictorially literate. Lindsay uses the word “symbolize,” but his hieroglyphics in *The Art of the Moving Picture* are actually quite literal. This dictionary-like presentation of hieroglyphics simply states all potential meanings of a given picture-word.²³

Lindsay’s mature hieroglyphic style, on the other hand, could function as it does in “The Celestial Flowers of Glacier Park,” a poem from his 1926 collection *Going to the Stars*. Here, Lindsay recasts flowers as a cipher for the interplay of fictional characters, dreams, the divine, and anthropomorphized nature. These are some of Lindsay’s flowers: “The Bee’s Book,” “The Red Ant’s Towers,” “The South Wind’s Lady,” “The Breasts of Pocahontas,” “Romeo’s Cap,” and “The Mohawk Fantasy” (*Poems* 2 593-597, lines 11, 20, 24, 40, 44, 46). With the accompanying illustrations (figure 3), Lindsay proposes a new set of hieroglyphic characters from natural phenomena that signify in multiple directions at once. Nature is not just nature, but a gesture towards greater totalities of human history and Lindsay’s own fanciful (and at times idiosyncratic) musings. Despite sounding nonsensical, the poem’s musings pose a spiritual complexity beneath the textual surface of ordinary nature.

Using this same logic, Lindsay reads human beings themselves as hieroglyphic texts, as the unrealized types of broader spiritual ideals that pervade them. The school principal he describes in “Hieroglyphic Sermons,” for example, misguidedly thinks he improves the quality of education in his town by expanding the sheer size of the school

facilities. “This,” laments Lindsay, “is standardization with a vengeance” (xxvii). Yet for Lindsay this imperfect approach to gathering multitudes of citizens contains the traces of a New Localist utopia: “Yet I see the ‘Amaranth,’ the special ‘Springfield Hieroglyphic,’ in the air above him. This is the secret. It is a secret something akin to the ‘Village Improvement Parade’ (*Collected* xxvii).” Beneath the seemingly modern phenomena of institutional organization, Lindsay sees the spirit of masses organized around civic beauty and local arts; behind the standardized roster of school programs lies, in the words of “A Gospel of Beauty,” the potential to create “The Artist’s town of Bethlehem” (*Poems I* 168). Whether they are the regimented pupils of modern education or the standardized desires of his crowd audiences who call for the same old favorites, the masses that increasingly frustrated Lindsay now figured a deeper, spiritual beauty of which they themselves were unaware. Within their standardized life he saw its opposite:

The unstandardized thing is the overwhelming flame of youth that swept up and sweeps up from those thousands and hundreds of thousands of faces. It is a changing flame of far more subtle colors than the critic knows, a flame that still possesses me... and still burns on through my heart and mind and body and bone and soul. The critic hears my voice. [But] He does not look down into those faces, into an audience of one thousand different dazzling hieroglyphics of flame, differing from one another as one star differeth from another star in glory. My mystic Springfield is here, also, in its fashion (*Collected* xxvi).

Human beings and their aggregations no longer appealed to Lindsay as primary texts of the democratic public, a vast body politic of evidence to be explored and collected as he

forged a representative popular art form. Where the Higher Vaudeville had failed, hieroglyphic mysticism would succeed. Thus reconfigured, these human subjects are intersections of two realms of which Lindsay claims to have visionary knowledge. Recital audiences were now unwitting indicators of a more fundamental spiritual promise that would not disappoint his ambitions as a representative artist. To one attuned to their mystical essence, the masses were a sign of an otherwise unknowable Utopian future, the “mystic Springfield” that is the ideal harmony of nature, society, and spirit. The hieroglyph’s semiotic elasticity binds everyday people, Lindsay’s poems and drawings, and the sacredly sublime together into a single unity visible to the poet.

IV. Conclusion

Lindsay's final three volumes of poetry—*Going to the Stars* (1926), *The Candle in the Cabin* (1926), and *Every Soul a Circus* (1929)—can generally be understood as a continued departure from his earliest aesthetics of the popular. Many of these poems still hinge on hieroglyphic illustrations. Thematically, they deal with the fanciful manifestations of beauty, bravery, and charity rather than everyday citizens. In these poems, a reader is more likely to encounter ornate celebrations of nature, idiosyncratic tales of rangers or Native Americans, or playful tributes to animals (especially butterflies) than the imaginary redemption of the masses.²⁴ Where Lindsay does touch on the political themes of his earlier work, he writes about examples that are historically removed from the context of the twentieth-century United States. His oration on Andrew Jackson in *Going to the Stars* (1926), for example, contains a section entitled “The Coming of Tomorrow of the American Democracy.” Yet rather than engage with the

possibilities of mass democracy in the 20th century, Lindsay's poem describes Jackson and the democratic public whimsically: "He rides the Pacific on clouds red and white, / Our Democracy's children ride westward with him" (*PVL* 2 568).²⁵ Continuing to despair over his touring schedule, he avoided the contemporary masses in his poetry until he died in 1931.

Lindsay's political aesthetics fell short of his expectations because their object—the "people" broadly constructed as a mass subject—was not as coherent or ultimately knowable as he had supposed. The failure of Lindsay's aesthetic of the popular to produce tangible results (whether it be a domestic cultural renaissance or a satisfying account of other folk cultures' identities and desires) meant that the masses had resisted, even frustrated, his attempts to understand them, regardless of how rigorously he toured as a pauper poet. Lindsay's reaction, as we have seen, was the creation of a new aesthetics of the popular, a primitive fantasy that saw beyond the masses he once celebrated into the mystical substance beneath their surface.

As latter-day readers, we can join Lindsay in interpreting his devotion to popular sensibilities as a dialogue with Whitman's poetic mythos, but with a greater awareness of the stakes involved. Even as Lindsay criticized him for spending too much time in cafés, he accepted Whitman's blueprint for a distinctly "American" poetry: an aesthetic of the common people fused to the project of democratic politics. For Lindsay, as it was for Whitman, knowing the people meant having the power to create art that was both cast in their image and suitable for their uplift into better democratic citizens. In effect, Lindsay modernized the Whitmanic tradition, and in so doing, articulated the nascent desires of the early Lincoln Republic to the challenges of extending liberal democracy to the masses

in the twentieth century. Lindsay, unlike Whitman, really had “met them face to face.” Yet how should we interpret the results of his encounters with the early twentieth-century masses?

Lindsay’s career signals to us the difficulty of accomplishing such an ambitious representational feat in both art and politics. Lindsay’s failures—from the botched portrayal of a universal “folk” in “The Congo” to his retreat from the “common people” who spoiled his theory of mass art—chart the fault lines of any so-called “democratic literature.” Lindsay discovered first hand that no poet, no body of writing could adequately understand or give voice to “the people” because “the people” as a unitary organ is a fiction created by the narratives about them. Long before the well-documented struggle over this semiotic terrain in the 1930s, Lindsay’s example reveals “the people” as a vexed site of interpretation whose instability threatened the real possibilities of democratic Utopia.

In effect, Lindsay’s attempt to create a democratic literature faced the same challenge as democratic political organization in the early twentieth century: how can the masses be accurately represented without sacrificing the myth of coherence necessary to authorize the representative (or representative government) in the first place? Lindsay’s poetry and the divided critical reaction to his various attempts to represent human groups testify to the enduring difficulties of this project, both aesthetically and politically. The discourses of popular democracy construct the masses as the rightful sovereigns, and in so doing, imbue them with political capacities distributed over countless citizens. We have already observed the way that Veritism attempts to align literary representation with the goals of reconciling popular sovereignty with the realities of the twentieth century.

Yet where Garland relied on “region” to compartmentalize the body politic into more legible units, Lindsay attempted to account for the body politic at large. Continuous with Progressive ideals of creating a polity with a unified purpose, Lindsay’s poetic project aimed to derive this “purpose” from an exhaustive catalog of every last citizen’s thinking. Yet even today it is unclear exactly how such direct political representation might take place. Lindsay’s example shows us that even if democracy were “pure” in the sense of its representational powers, political will would remain the object of subjective interpretation.



A MAP OF THE UNIVERSE ISSUED IN 1909.
THIS MAP IS ONE BEGINNING OF THE
GOLDEN BOOK OF SPRINGFIELD.

Summer, 1904

Fig. 1. "The Map of the Universe," drawing by Vachel Lindsay, in *The Poems of Vachel Lindsay, Volume 1*, ed. Dennis Camp (Peoria: Spoon River, 1984), 62.

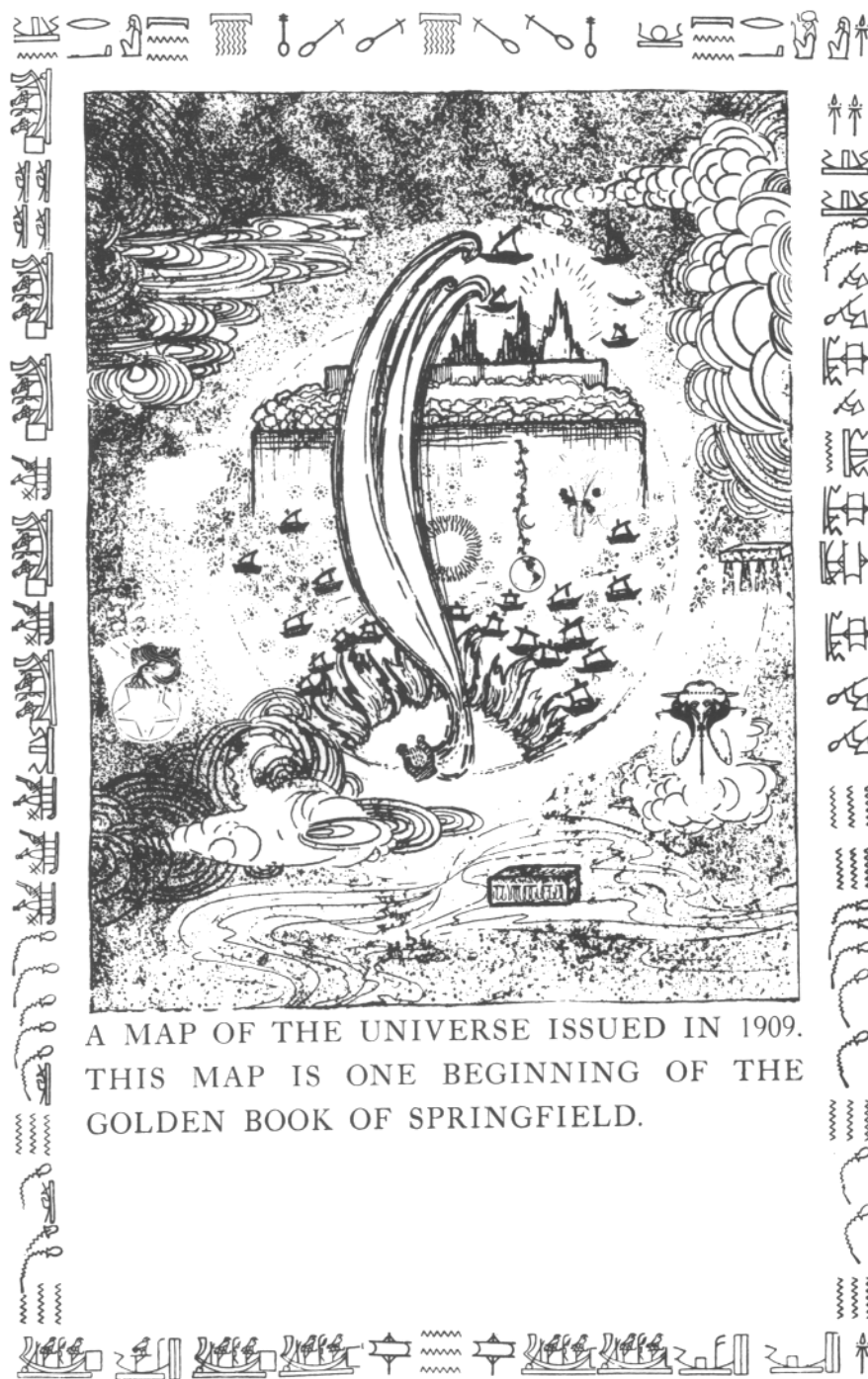
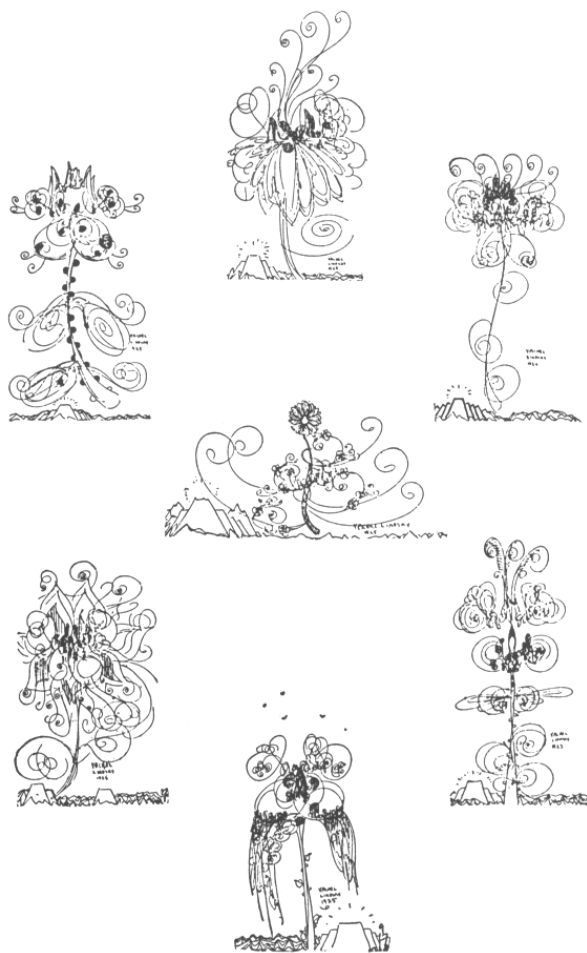


Fig. 2. "The Map of the Universe, Second Edition" drawing by Vachel Lindsay, in *The Poems of Vachel Lindsay, Volume 2*, ed. Dennis Camp (Peoria: Spoon River, 1984), 496.



The Angel's Puff Ball
The Bee's Book
The Chipmunk's Big Salt Cellar
A Daisy Gone Wrong
Lettuce for the Deer
The Fountain of Feathers
The Sparrow's Fortune Teller

Fig. 3. "The Celestial Flowers of Glacier Park," drawing by Vachel Lindsay for the poem, in *The Poems of Vachel Lindsay, Volume 2*, ed. Dennis Camp (Peoria: Spoon River, 1984), 594-95.

NOTES

1. Much of the contemporary scholarship on Lindsay not devoted to “The Congo” leaves unexamined the project of knowing and understanding the masses. Ruggles is unambiguously celebratory of Lindsay as “a larger than life” American figure “with something of the rollicking western humor of Mark Twain, the gallantry of Poe, and the democratic warmth of Whitman” (14). Ruggles deflects most of the attention away from Lindsay’s struggle with the idea of democracy towards his health. Still considered the most accurate account of Lindsay’s life (despite its obvious pro-Lindsay bias), Anna Massa’s 1970 biography casts Lindsay as the “poet of the people” who sought to redeem them from the threats of modernity. While Massa recognizes some of Lindsay’s own ambivalence about the mediocrity he found in the common people, she is largely uncritical of Lindsay’s ambition to “evolve a poetry whose form and content, while retaining beauty, would make the medium meaningful and pleasurable to the mass of Americans.” See Massa 19. In his more recent introduction to *The Golden Book of Springfield*, Ron Sakolsky places Lindsay within a tradition he calls “Johnny Appleseed Utopianism.” Like Massa, Sakolsky accepts Lindsay’s wanderings and recitation tours as an attempt to connect with the authentic population of everyday Americans without considering the potential complications of this enterprise. See Sakolsky lvi. For more recent examples that celebrate Lindsay’s democratic representative powers, see Furry. Examples of criticism of “The Congo” will be treated in more detail later in this essay.
2. Lindsay’s biographers try to reconcile this apparent conflict by insisting on Lindsay’s anti-racist politics. Sakolsky suggests that Lindsay wanted to “strategically utilize

elements of minstrelsy as expressed in Vaudeville for his own anti-racist educational purposes” (xxviii). Susan Gubar calls the poem a “self-sacrificial fantasy of racechange” in which Lindsay strategically manipulates African-American impersonation to implicate his audiences’ own barbaric impulses. She remarks that “Lindsay is often ignored in histories of twentieth-century poetry because judged to be exceptionally reactionary in his racism. However, he was much more liberal than many of his poetic contemporaries...” See Gubar 142.

3. Reading Lindsay’s poetry for its evolving response to the political and aesthetic challenges posed by representing “the people” breaks with narratives like Massa’s, who accounts for the shifts in Lindsay’s poetry during the 1920s by pointing to his “facility for objectivity and long-term value judgments” and his “brand of pessimistic realism” that spanned his entire career. See Massa 19.
4. In 1906, Lindsay walked a large area of the United States from Jacksonville, Florida, to Kentucky. After an interim period of publishing and writing, he again embarked in 1912, traveling from Springfield through Kansas, California, and New Mexico.
5. For more on New Localism, see Massa 37-42.
6. For an explanation of middlebrow “culture” in the United States, see Hegeman 76
7. Lindsay takes up this fantasy in an extended, explicit account in *The Golden Book of Springfield*.
8. For more information about Lindsay's relationship to the folk subject matter of his supposed democratic poetry, see Regan 119 and McAlister 106-110.
9. For examples of such critiques, see Gubar 140-142, and DuPlessis 86-93. For Gubar, “The Congo” is a taboo performance of “blackness” for white audiences that trips over

its own racist implications as it attempts a more progressive rejection of colonialism.

Duplessis' indictment is more severe. She reads "The Congo" as the realization of white male colonial fantasies of violence, sexual power, and atavism.

10. See Sakolsky xxvi-xxvii.

11. Lindsay offered a similar description of the poem two months earlier to

Harriet Monroe. See February 16, 1914, *Letters* 89.

12. The images of pennants, flags, and temples echo the alliance between beauty and

Utopia in poems such as "An Argument" (1913) "Rhyme about an Electrical Advertising Sign" (1913-1914), and "Billboards and Galleons" (1924). "Billboards," in particular, figures the Utopian reconciliation of modern and antiquarian cultures through the comparison of "filigree towers of mystery" and "the mast-filled sky" of Spanish galleons. See *Poems 1* 194-196 and *Poems 2* 520-526, especially lines 245-252.

13. See Van Wienen.

14. See editor's footnote in *Letters* 182.

15. See Goldwater 17

16. See Carr 65.

17. See Pavloska xii-xv for a brief but useful overview of romantic primitive philosophy in Rousseau and Montaigne.

18. See also Carr and Delvin.

19. See also Nye 42-55.

20. Lindsay also counted Aztecs, Toltecs, and Spanish nobility among the contributors to his bloodline. See Lindsay, *Letters* 260-262.

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21. Lindsay's neo-romantic treatment of hieroglyphics echoes 19th century fantasies of hieroglyphics as "natural language." See Irwin.
22. See Massa 255-265
23. Earlier, Lindsay praised this visual vocabulary for its ability to inspire "the cave-men and women of our slums" to democratic participation. Films, he predicts, will cultivate en masse an appreciation of the visual, and therefore, the work of visual artists of all kinds. "The voters will respond to the aspirations of these artists as the back-woodsmen followed Poor Richard's Almanac, or the trappers in their coon-skin caps were fired to patriotism by Patrick Henry." Here again we can contrast this earlier optimism for the potential of aesthetics and democratic reform against the later use of hieroglyphics, which can only be interpreted by the visionary Lindsay. See Lindsay, *Moving Picture* 171, 186.
24. See as examples "The Angel Sons" (*Poems* 2 573), "The Red Eagle Love Song" (620), "The Red Indian Bride" (627), "The Butterfly Citizens" (661), "What is the Mohawk" (685), "The Tree-Climbing Fish" (706), and "Five Seals in the Sky" (728-731).
25. See also the better known "The Virginians are Coming Again" (*Poems* 2 687-690).

Chapter III: “To Know the Masses of My People”: James Weldon Johnson and the Problem of Racial Representation

I was anxious to learn to know the masses of my people, to know what they thought, what they felt, and the things of which they dreamed; and in trying to find out, I laid the first stones in the foundation of faith in them on which I have stood ever since

James Weldon Johnson, *Along This Way* 120.

James Weldon Johnson’s career spans the early-twentieth century’s two major historical periods of African-American writing—the post-reconstruction writing of the nadir and the New Negro Renaissance. His best known work, *The Autobiography of An Ex-Colored Man*, was first published in 1912, but then later republished (under much wider recognition and appreciation) as a Renaissance text in 1927. Johnson’s other writings of the 1920s make it easy to understand why critics have so readily incorporated Johnson into their vision of the Renaissance. *The Book of American Negro Poetry* (1922), *The Book of American Negro Spirituals* (1925), and *God’s Trombones* (1927) showcased the “folk art” that Alain Locke praised in his introduction to *The New Negro Anthology* as the means to win “[t]he especially cultural recognition” that would in turn “prove the key to that revaluation of the Negro which must precede or accompany any considerable further betterment of race relationships.” This betterment, thought Locke, “will have added the motives of self-expression and spiritual development to the old and still unfinished task of making material headway and progress” (Locke 16). Yet by the time

Johnson's writing joined the rising tide of African-American cultural expression in the 1920s, he had already worked for decades as teacher, lawyer, songwriter, diplomat, journalist, writer, and activist. Born in 1871, Johnson was nearly twenty years senior to many of the movement's most recognized artists. Because Johnson began writing *The Autobiography* in 1906, the text did not initially operate in the cultural and intellectual milieu of the 1920s, even if it was later accepted into it.

The Autobiography gained wider recognition as a Renaissance text, but it was conceived and written against the historical backdrop of the U.S. nadir of racial relations. Growing up in the Jim Crow South, Johnson witnessed some of the worst abuses that color-line racism had to offer. Without downplaying the intellectual influences that Johnson exerted on the Renaissance, it is fair to wonder about the text's original circumstances of production. What, in short, was the text trying to do in the early 1900s that we do not see if we only read it as a text of the 1920s aesthetic experimentation? This chapter examines Johnson's career as a writer and as a political activist in order to rethink the relationship between some of his literary writing and his politics. More specifically, the chapter rethinks Johnson's literary output in the context of the problems of mass democracy that the nadir forced into the forefront of the race question. Like the NAACP career he would take up after 1916, Johnson's literary career focused on the advancement of citizenship rights before it helped mentor a new generation of aesthetic experimentation and cultural identity. To return to Locke's words, before Johnson ever participated in the bid to "win cultural recognition" through literary performance, he worked for years to accomplish "the old and still unfinished task of making material headway and progress."

Johnson's work—both political and literary—pushed for citizenship rights at the height of the Jim Crow era. The cultural and legal regime of Jim Crow relied on an essentializing, white supremacist epistemology that made racial membership equivalent to the bar of citizenship. While U.S. democracy nominally rested on the ideal of universal citizenship, racist oppression of African-Americans' basic rights told a different story about the viability of non-white citizens. White supremacist epistemology saw the black masses alternately as the politically cooperative threat of "Negro Domination" and (contradictorily) as a class of naïve, disorganized non-citizens overly susceptible to a leader's manipulation. In short, the white racist imagination that justified suppression of African-American citizenship rights projected the basic anxieties about democracy in the age of massification along the lines of essentialized racial categories. The color line was inflected by wider anxieties about mass liberal democracy in the age of massification because the very idea of African-American citizens called into question the viability of democracy for white racists. Johnson's writing rejects this racialized division of citizens and masses by advocating for different modes of African-American representation in text. The *Autobiography*, which is the focal point of this chapter, makes its textual bid for citizenship using distinctly different strategies of uplift than the uplift biographies that preceded and were contemporaneous with it. In writing an autobiography, a literary genre coded as truth-telling and representative of black life, Johnson leveraged his white audience's expectations for racial representativity inherent to black autobiography to position his anonymous narrator as a reliable spokesperson about both the race and the problem of U.S. race relations. If whites had intensified their anxieties about the masses in democracy in their vision of the *black* masses, Johnson's novel situates itself as the

representative voice that could parse the inessential from the essential, the spokesperson who could explain the “truth” of the race's collective existence and reveal its basic compatibility with the democracy that had excluded it.

Importantly, the text's ambitions for truth telling depend on a concept of “race” as an essentialized category in order to establish a stable territory of representation about which it can make claims. As we have seen, both Lindsay and Garland searched for principles of coherence in the body politic that they could in turn circulate through literature. Lindsay, we have seen, investigated the “common people” in hopes of discovering the universal essence of his mass subjects. Eventually turning to a primitivized vision of the masses, Lindsay believed he could create a genuinely popular aesthetic with national appeal. Garland's concept of “region,” on the other hand, focused less on national commonness. Veritism compartmentalized what might otherwise be an inaccessible mass body politic by homogenizing the experience of subjects in a given territory, making it easier to pinpoint and translate that experience through text.

Johnson's use of “race” renders cultural what Garland attempted to make spatial—the boundaries that demarcate a navigable segment of the body politic. Johnson's adaptation of race to describe a representable segment of the polity situates him in the emerging paradigm of pluralism. By pluralism, I do not mean a specifically “cultural pluralism,” the name of the intellectual perspective that would later influence U.S. conceptions of race. Instead, I refer to a more generic paradigm of representation within democracy that rejects a unified State or national people in favor of recognizing a plurality of interests and factions that compete for political control. For Johnson, a pluralist vision of politics breaks down the “one race, one kind of citizen” logic of the

color line by offering an opportunity for U.S. democracy to realize universal citizenship. The examples of Garland and Lindsay show how useful essentialized categories (region, “the people”) could be for the problems of modern liberal democracy. By using race as the boundaries of a “community of interest,” Johnson translated the basis of racial exclusion into the vernacular of liberal democracy. As I will argue below, Johnson’s time as U.S. consul in Venezuela impressed on him the usefulness of racial categories in a post-Jim Crow future.

While I examine a range of texts, from his political writings to his poetry to his later collections of spirituals, poetry, and sermons, I focus particularly on Johnson’s *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* as the centerpiece of his representational aesthetics. The chapter begins by reviewing the textual politics of the black autobiography and the claims the genre stakes to representativity. As we will see, audiences looked to these texts for authentic representations of African-American life because they understood texts in the genre to be speaking on behalf of a racial group. Yet the readership’s need for “authentic” African-American voices poses problems for the definition of race itself as a coherent totality. In the next section of the chapter, I consider the rise of Jim Crow racism alongside the cultural imaginary that shaped white fears about black citizenship. Black citizens represented an exaggerated version of the problems of mass social organization, and their disenfranchisement stemmed from a racist belief about the fate of the republic. In the third part of this chapter, I juxtapose these U.S. racial politics with the Venezuelan racial politics that Johnson encountered and wrote about during his time abroad when he wrote most of *The Autobiography*. While commonly glossed as a country without a color line, Venezuelan society faced its own

crisis of liberal democracy at the turn of the twentieth century that hinged on a racial vision of citizenship. The landscape of Venezuelan racial relations exposed Johnson to the utility of “race” as a category of identity in struggles against racist definitions of citizenship. Finally, I turn to *The Autobiography* itself, reading it as a deliberate attempt to present the truth of the race and race relations. The text’s racial representation mimics the representative logic of popular democracy in the early twentieth century by consolidating a segment of the body politic that in turn authorizes the representative speaker. Where the official channels of representation excluded African-American citizens, representative writing could erode white supremacist epistemology by providing “accurate” representations of the race. Johnson’s project of racial representation therefore balances the challenges of eroding homogenizing stereotype against the rules of engagement for political representation. His work marks a key intersection between discourses of racial uplift and the shifting demands of democratic representation during the turn to pluralism.

I. Textual Politics of Black Autobiography

Autobiography, especially black autobiography in the early twentieth century United States, was a genre coded as bearing truth about the racial collective. As Kenneth Mostern has argued, the narrative voices of black autobiography consistently “insist on their relationship to a ‘we’ in African-American history” (50). Indeed, by the time Johnson wrote *The Autobiography*, the pressures of racial representation had long been built into the genre. William Andrews has used the term “Tuskegee Realism” to describe an early 20th century regime of textual conventions that insist on the “reality” of the

biographical voice. Washington aimed, says Andrews, to dethrone the “man of words” as the idealized figure of uplift and instead insist on a narrative voice that reflected a “real man” and “real things” (85-86). For this reason, Washington preferred autobiography (86). Tuskegee realism, then, insisted that writing’s relationship to a “we” in African-American history be reliable (that is, “true”) and grounded in the factual deeds of the “we” rather than an idealistic demonstration of one man’s verbal and intellectual prowess. More recently, Gene Jarrett has called the realist, truth-telling conventions of African American writing “racial realism.” Jarrett points to the hegemony of a realist aesthetics in African American literature that obligate black authors to write about “the truth of the black experience” (8).¹ In their attempts to take up non-racial themes, black writers continually ran up against critical and popular sensibilities that demanded “accurate” depictions of black life.

To do as Johnson did—to write as an identifiably black (albeit anonymous) author of a book about black life—was to confront directly the public expectation for “realistic” representation of African-Americans. Indeed, Johnson’s choice of title, the fictional “publisher’s preface” that begins the novel, and the narrator’s confessional tone seem to embrace these textual responsibilities. Evidence surrounding the novel’s original publication suggests that Johnson intended *The Autobiography* to be taken as a serious representative effort. In a letter to George Townes, Johnson wrote: “It was my object to put before the reader certain facts without having him feel that the narrator was prejudiced” (Jackson 189). Johnson, in this same letter, boasted of the positive review *The Autobiography* received from *The Springfield Republican*, which called the novel “a human document” (189). Johnson suggests that he included the anonymous fictional

narrator in order to augment the text's credibility, since he thought an impartial speaker would be better accepted than a known, biased one. That it was received as a "human" document, in Johnson's words, "makes me pardonably proud of my workmanship" (189) to create an authentic sounding voice that was actually fictional. He wrote on:

I am sure you can see that in the acceptance of the story as true lies its strongest appeal; for that reason it does not bear my name, and for the same reason I did not cast it in conventional fiction form. When the author is known, and known to be one who could not be the main character of the story, the book will fall flat; so, for the present, you will please withhold publishing me as the author. If the book succeeds I shall claim it later, if it doesn't, well there won't be anything lost. (189)

Johnson, in short, wants to take up the position of what Andrews calls the "sanitized speaker" pioneered by Tuskegee Realism (Andrews 86). This speaker, brushed clean of any accountability to a real life outside the text, is loaded with enough plausibility to be accepted as "true" (even if the novel's fictional scenarios amount to illustrations of Johnson's theories about race and race relations, some of which he repeats in print later in life).² The sanitized speaker thus offers an ideal position from which to offer a "realistic" account of its subject matter. Rather than stake its bid for citizenship to a performance of words, the *Autobiography* aims to demonstrate the factual experience of a racial "we," even if its events were themselves fictional. For Johnson, the anonymous fictional *Autobiography* was a safe way to pilot a representation of black America that he could later claim if it resonated with audiences.

A 1913 review of *The Autobiography* by Johnson's friend and literary advisor,

Brander Matthews, testifies to the text's alignment with realist genres of representative writing. In a multi-book review entitled "American Character in American Fiction: Three Books Which Depict the Actualities of Present-Day Life," Matthews praises the novel's "indisputable veracity." "It has significance for all of us" explains Matthews, "who want to understand our fellow citizens of darker hue. It is composed in full accord with the principle... [that] 'a writer should be a psychologist...a transmitter of ideas and feelings, not sensations'" (Matthews 798). Like Howells' *New Leaf Mills* (a semi-autobiographical local color novel set in the middle west), *The Autobiography* makes its literary mark by being "rich in human nature" (798). That a review of Johnson's work would ally it with Howellsian local color fiction (especially since this review was authored by a friend who corresponded frequently with Johnson) suggests that it not only straddles the generic conventions of fiction and autobiography (something Matthews himself seems to suggest in his review), but that its narrative style overlaps with the well-known conventions of Realist representative writing. Placed in relationship to *New Leaf Mills*, *The Autobiography* becomes a double play on "local color"—the text embraces the task of accurately representing the details of everyday life in the marginal spaces outside the literary mainstream, *and* it marks such content as racially "colored." The side-by-side presentation of local color with local *color* marks a key generic intersection from which Johnson's text hailed its white audiences. Where local color writing, like Garland's Veritism, promised the accurate portrayal of life from coherently defined spaces (like "region"), *The Autobiography* offered a realistic account of life from the racially defined territory of "coloredness."

Critical analysis of *The Autobiography*, however, often focuses on the text's

subversive effects on the conventions of racial representation. Critics' arguments for the root of this subversiveness range from the narrator's anonymity, to the text's sarcastic irony, to the instability of race itself as a category. At the heart of these critical discussions about the text's representative ambitions is theory of what it means to represent race, and specifically, what it means to represent "the Negro" as a racial category in the early twentieth century when homogenizing racial categories served to limit citizenship rights and political representation. Because the text's representativity partially hinges on the authority of its speaker, critics have fixated on the speaker's authority as proof of the text's rejection of racial representation in the first place. William Andrews broadly wonders: "Does the fictiveness of the narrator invalidate the authority of what he says?" (Andrews 88). Eric Sundquist has called the text "A masterly catalog of evasions and half-truths (47)," because the parodies it performs under the guise of authenticity end up mocking the genre itself. One recent critic argues that Johnson intentionally adds "lackluster moments of critical commentary" about American culture and race relations as a strategy for debunking the narrator's representational authority. Supposedly wishing to escape the pressure to "speak for" black America, the narrator's clumsy analysis is meant to establish him as an anti-hero, a failed representative voice that obviously parodies his audience's desire for representativity.³

Robert Stepto's analysis explicitly trades on the narrative's parody of its own representative ambitions. According to Stepto, Johnson tailors the narrator's "posture and rhetoric of detachment" so he can create a voice that "has the rhetoric turn back upon its speaker in such a way that his character is exposed as his argument, in all its failings, is advanced" (111). Stepto contrasts Johnson's literary style—"literary means to a literary

end”—with Booker T. Washington's “extraliterary” focus on ends outside of the text itself (presumably part of his appeal to white literary audiences for funding) (108). For Stepto, the narrator's rhetorical detachment is not intended to reach out to audiences, but to cleverly undercut his own voice, whose authority we are to disavow once we are in on the stylistic prank. With the speaker's authority destabilized, we supposedly recognize his effort to locate and translate the essence of African-American culture as a didactic failure; the racial speaker's unreliability is meant to reflect the unreliability of race itself as a representable category of identity.

Johnson subverts or parodies his audience's desire for representativity, argues Ross Posnock, because he rejects “race” itself. Citing the intellectual context of pragmatist cosmopolitanism, Posnock calls the novel an “anti-race race text,” that is, a text written with racial themes that rebels against the restrictive boundaries of “race” as a category of identity. *The Autobiography's* narrator aims to be an exemplar, and to be an exemplar, says Posnock, is to accept what DuBois called “the burden of representation” (37, 74). Rather than assume the superhuman task of being a faultless example of the race uplifted, he argues, *The Autobiography* rejects classification to escape the demands of uplift, of always speaking for the race by crafting “an elaborate maze of imposture” (75). While the narrator fails to “enlarge the domain of representation” because he abandons his efforts to create a new racial culture, the novel mocks his decision to pass—his submission to “racial division”—by comparing his failures to the success of DuBois and others (75). Like Stepto, Posnock suggests that the reader is meant to share the narrator's disgust with himself. The ending, then, valorizes the abandoned project that would have challenged the evils of classification and stereotype. Faced with the choice of refusing

fixed categories of identity or accepting them, the Ex-Colored man accepts them, and this choice supposedly dooms him to complicity with Jim Crow.

Taken together, these analyses of *The Autobiography* and its project of racial representation emphasize “race” as an inadequate category of definition that homogenizes identity and restricts freedom. For these critics, it is more appealing to read *The Autobiography* as an obviously flawed attempt to commit the crime of representing something that, more properly considered, defies representation. In making these arguments, critics mistake or omit completely Johnson’s racial politics. While other writers might have been duped into exemplarhood, while other texts might have succumbed uncritically to the audience’s desire for authenticity, as these arguments imply, Johnson knew better. A subversive trickster, Johnson’s narrator was really mocking his readers’ expectations for racial representation because Johnson understood the limitations of race as a category. By championing the text’s rejection of race, these critics make an argument not only about the political work the text might have performed in spite of Johnson’s intentions, but also about Johnson’s racial politics and their expression in the text’s rhetorical maneuvers.

The problem however, is that Johnson’s racial politics were not at all anti-race, and while it is impossible to discount the potential rhetorical effects loaded into the text (effects that include a critical reflection on race itself), it is inaccurate to suggest that Johnson himself meant to reject the possibility of racial representation by writing an elaborate joke, nor is it correct to suggest that Johnson was himself anti-race. By posing Johnson and his *The Autobiography* as resistant “tricksters” that undercut racial categories, these critical evaluations create a second, related misinterpretation of

Johnson's politics: they assign an incredibly nuanced representational politics that belong more to a post-structuralist scholar than a turn-of-the-century song-writer, poet, and diplomat. By invoking race as a coherent category of membership in its preface—a "freemasonry"—*The Autobiography* does inherit all the conceptual baggage of using such essentializations. That Johnson's attempt to create a "composite and proportionate presentation" disclosed fault lines and contradictions in the definition of African-American life it advances is unsurprising. What is implausible is that Johnson understood this to be his political contribution to African-American uplift. Critics, however, are attracted to readings of the novel that distrust its attempt to represent race because we understand "race" to be a damaged concept, a homogenizing construction that both imprisons its supposed members within stereotype, and threatens to confine uplift politics to the tidy, impossible standards of essentialized identity..

How, then, can race function as the object of representative writing? For Posnock, literary representation of a "race" is fraught, because it "works by a synecdochic (or identity) logic which unwittingly replicates the ontology of Jim Crow." This "logic of substitution," where one drop of blood stands in for the whole of an imagined "blackness," also exists in any effort to speak for a racial whole. In attempting to create homogeneity, in attempting to be "one of the people," a racial representative "assures a disturbing circularity" where "enemy and opponent share the same logic" (Posnock 74). Yet the narrator's position vis-a-vis the object of representation cannot always be explained by synecdoche. Where the representative "exemplar" seems to embrace such a relationship (the exemplar must be both a *typical* member of the group he speaks for and an *exceptional* demonstration of that group's potential), the conventions of literary

realism suggest a different representational link between text and subject matter.⁴ As we have seen, Tuskegee Realism adopts a very different representational posture because it “denies the performative dimension of representation” and “consign[s] literary representation to a *reactive* status in Afro-American culture” (Andrews 86-87). In other words, Tuskegee realism subordinated writing to a reflection of African-American action, where previously it had been a promise or performance of intellectual ability.

If the exemplar is expected to “speak for” the masses for which he stands, the realist narrator “speaks about” the facts of his racial subject matter.⁵ Lindsay’s search for an aesthetic of the popular based itself on a similar relationship between writer and subject matter. While Lindsay understood his own position in society to be closer to the “common people” he studied, he did not believe, as Garland did, that his membership in a particular class of citizens enabled him to speak for them. Instead, Lindsay based his conclusions on the “common people” on a catalog of accumulated observations. Like Johnson’s *Ex-Colored Man*, Lindsay toured the country as an “outsider” searching for the soul of his chosen subject matter. The *Ex-Colored Man* engages in two sets of wanderings throughout the United States. First, he travels around the South and eventually to New York, where he learns ragtime music and meets his “millionaire” patron. After touring the world with his patron, he sets out on his second tour of the country, where he plans “to go back into the very heart of the South, to live among the people, and drink in my inspiration first hand” (Johnson, *Autobiography* 66). This “Lindsayan” approach to discovering the foundations of popular experience (whether it be African-American life across the country or the essence of their folk culture) positions the writer as more the interpreter than the exemplar. The “publisher’s preface” argues for

precisely this relationship between the narrator and the racial subject matter to follow. In attempting to “speak about,” the narrator eschews the expectations of the exemplar, taking up instead a politics of mass representation more in line with Progressive impulses to “discover” something about the masses that could somehow serve the purposes of social reform. For Johnson, this reform would be the erosion of racist stereotypes and the recognition of African Americans’ fitness for citizenship.

Finally, assumptions like those that underpin Stepto's and Posnock's analyses—that we are meant to share the narrator's self-disgust because the real argument of the novel is about the impossibility of defining race as totality or as essential essence—misunderstand the role of essentialized categories in early-twentieth century democracy. As we have seen, political representation that claims to “speak for” the political reality of its constituency needs to establish some defining parameters around the segment of the polity it represents. Where the erosion of the “organic State” as a myth supporting popular sovereignty prompted Garland to rely on “region” to create coherent units of representation, the rising tide of difference within the U.S. body politic demanded new conceptual frameworks that would both account for variation and allow the older myths of popularly authored representations to survive. Lindsay, like a good Progressive, devoted much of his life to cultivating a national people around shared aesthetic sensibilities. The turn to pluralism in U.S. can be understood as a repartitioning of the body politic into smaller units organized according to principles of unity that were more reliable indicators of “political reality” than the failing myth of the “national people.” I want to consider Johnson's embrace of “race,” then, as strategy for creating the conceptual boundary around a segment of the polity that he wanted to render legible. The

logic of racial categories, in other words, was compatible with an emerging paradigm of U.S. democratic politics that was interested in reconciling the different interests, values, and solidarities with the notion of a “public” whose will was best served by representative government.⁶

Race, then, could function as the means to define an object of representation. Other literary solutions to the challenges of democracy in the age of massification, as we have seen, explored different means to reliably communicate the kernel of some segment of the body politic through writing. These textual representations engaged in some way with the difficulties of managing masses. Johnson's attempts to produce representative literary work for a disenfranchised, legally suppressed segment of the body politic should therefore call our attention to precisely the “extraliterary efforts” that Stepto distances from Johnson's writing. After all, why *wouldn't* Johnson have extraliterary ends in mind for *The Autobiography*? Why should we zero in on the deft rhetorical play of irony, deception, and destabilized meanings when those types of aesthetic moves might have been less important to Johnson's democratic liberalism? These questions do not dismiss the intricacy of *The Autobiography*. These questions do, however, ask us to reconsider how race might have functioned, not only in his activist politics but also in his representative literary efforts. The notion of “the race” allowed Johnson to stabilize a constituency at the same time that it provided an opportunity to confront the legal and cultural regime that pushed “the Negro” into the margins of power. Only by representing and renovating notions of “the race” could democracy's promise of “universal citizenship” be adapted to truly accommodate the idea of non-white citizens.

Johnson's liberal political program stressed winning citizenship rights, especially

the ballot, for all African Americans. For Johnson, this was not a matter of changing the law of the land, for the Constitution's Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments had already extended legal citizenship to African Americans. Rather, Johnson's efforts focused on creating transparent representation of “actual” conditions of African American life, both in their achievements that warranted citizenship and in the abuses they unjustly endured. In a 1924 essay, Johnson lamented that “for all his mass of numbers and his increase in education and wealth, the Negro remains as near being a political nonentity as is possible for a group of citizens in a country with anything that resembles a democratic form of government” (“Gentlemen's Agreement” 80). Despite their numbers as citizens, Johnson would go on to explain, blacks exercised little political power in elections because of Jim Crow laws. The result was a white citizenry supercharged with more political power than they should fairly wield. Johnson noted: “There are, of course, reasons why this condition exists, and these reasons ought to be found and the facts faced. It is only by such a process that the situation can be changed and remedied” (80). Fixing the problem of political representation, in short, required public representation of the “facts” of this crisis of black citizenship.⁷ Before Johnson applied his liberal politics to activism, he tested them in *The Autobiography*. The text leverages the representative textual expectations that surround it to present the color line as a misunderstanding that could be remedied by the representation that Jim Crow suppresses. Although these views might strike us as overly optimistic, Johnson believed he could cultivate understanding between racial factions, and that this understanding would convince whites to extend citizenship to African Americans.

II. Representation, Mass Democracy, and Johnson's Literary Writing

One critic has remarked: “That Johnson simultaneously could be a leader of the literary Renaissance and of the NAACP demonstrate how closely the goals of the two coincided” (Wilson II, 3). Yet while the goals of civil rights activism and experimental African-American writing might have roughly converged on the hopes for cultural and legal equality, the specific relationship between racial politics and racial writing remains underdeveloped in Johnson's case. Influential as Johnson's writing and mentoring would be to other African-American writers in the 1920s, the formative intellectual forces of his literary career do not fall neatly within the intellectual matrix that underpinned the Harlem Renaissance.⁸ While experimental aesthetics based on cultural nationalism were formative for writers such as Dubois, Locke, and Hurston, Johnson's literary interests are more indebted to the liberal political activism he developed earlier in his life. If we examine the biography of Johnson's life, together with the context of Jim Crow and the liberal assumptions about black citizenship that animated it, we see that Johnson responded to a different set of concerns about black uplift than his later Renaissance colleagues. For Johnson, establishing African-American identity was less important than criticizing the representational deficiencies of U.S. democracy and advocating for their resolution.

In his early career, Johnson was a teacher, journalist, and lawyer. He was the first African American to pass the Florida bar exam in 1898. Johnson attended Columbia from 1903-1906, but neither he nor his biographer make any particular reference to the teachings of John Dewey and Franz Boaz, who held professorships there starting in 1904 (Johnson, *Along this Way* 93). Johnson's major literary influence seems to have been

Brander Matthews, author of the review we have already seen and a professor of dramatic literature who “advocated a realistic portrayal of American life” (Levy 125). Neither was Johnson much connected to the Harvard circle of pragmatists headed by William James. So far as the record shows, Dewey was not a significant philosophical influence on Johnson. From 1906-1913, Johnson served as U.S. consul in Puerto Cabello, Venezuela and Cortino, Nicaragua. In 1916, he accepted the position of field secretary for the NAACP. Later in the same decade, Johnson's organizational efforts built the foundation of the Association's national chapter system. In 1920, he traveled to Haiti to investigate the harsh conditions of the American occupation there. Also in 1920, Johnson was appointed as the Secretary of the Association—the first African-American to hold such a position. The early 1920s saw Johnson vigorously pursue the Dyer Anti-Lynching Bill in Washington, as well as local cases that governed election laws in the South. Johnson toured the country, speaking on the problem of the color line and African-American citizenship wherever he went. By the time Johnson took leave of his NAACP duties in 1929, he had spent nearly 15 years pushing for political rights. Johnson did take time for some literary pursuits. The 1920s' interest in African-American writing fueled Johnson's efforts to publish his work on African-American folk culture (*The Book of American Negro Poetry* in 1922, *The Book of American Negro Spirituals* in 1925, and *God's Trombones* in 1927), and it led to the republication of *Autobiography*. Yet Johnson later remarked in his personal autobiography that “My own literary efforts and what part I played in creating the new literary Harlem were, however, merely excursions from my work with the Association” (*Along this Way* 560).

Johnson got his first taste of practical democratic politics in 1904, when friend

Charley Anderson asked him to serve as treasurer of the Colored Republican Club in New York City. The Club's goal was to turn out African-American voters in favor of Roosevelt for the fall presidential election (Levy 101-102). Alongside his organizational talents, Johnson's songwriting skills came in handy; he wrote "You're All Right, Teddy," a campaign song that met with Roosevelt's approval (102). Later, after Anderson accepted a local political office in New York, Johnson became the president of the Club at Anderson's urging. "He impressed on me," Johnson wrote in his own autobiography, "that the Club was a power and an influence, socially as well as politically, and that it must be kept alive" (*Along this Way* 375). Reflecting on his work there, he noted: "I would learn many lessons from this job, some of them hard, all of them valuable" (375). Johnson would later become very critical of Republican (and Democratic) politics⁹, but one immediate result of his work with the Club was to acquaint him with the basics of political organizing and administration—skills he would later use as field secretary and later secretary of the NAACP. Johnson's work with Anderson also produced the opportunity to join the U.S. consular services.¹⁰

Johnson's college and early professional years brought him face to face with the suppression of African-American citizenship rights in the South. The years 1890-1902, when Johnson lived in Georgia and Florida, saw the intensification of African-American disenfranchisement and segregation in the South, a legal and political order that political historians call "the Solid South." In an attempt to consolidate political power against the working-class Populist Party, the southern Democratic Party mounted a sustained campaign to turn African Americans against working-class whites who might have otherwise seen them as allies against wealthy elites. Democrats branded whites who

formed political alliances with African Americans as race traitors. Meanwhile, at the polling place, the Democratic Party bribed, threatened, miscounted, or fabricated its way to victory (Horton 110-112). According to historian Carol Horton, “The elections of 1892 and 1894 were wholesale frauds” (112). The African-American voter was doubly demonized—to white Democrats, he was a traitor to Anglo-Saxon government and an obstacle to one-party control. To the defeated Populists, he was the highly manipulable (and therefore unfit) segment of the polity that had betrayed the Party's chances to expand its influence. By 1896, the Democratic Party had consolidated political control into the hands of a few powerful politicians. With the Populist alliance broken, and African-Americans barred from the polls by poll taxes, literacy tests, and grandfather clauses, there was no one left to vote them out of office (106-119).

Jim Crow laws, then, spread all throughout the South specifically as a strategy for buoying up white political power and salving the ethnic tensions amongst whites themselves.¹¹ This elitist construction of democratic politics, notes Horton, emblemized the conflict between a Darwinian liberalism (which believed the strength of civilization came from competition, not welfare) and social liberalism (which valued abstract equality). African Americans' position *vis-a-vis* liberalism was therefore contradictory and unfair. While the elitist, competitive scheme of liberal democracy had led to disenfranchisement and segregation of a specific set of political interests, progressive liberals—with their emphasis on educating the citizenry—saw African Americans as an unstable, easily influenced segment of the polity. On the one hand, then, were the racist fears of “Negro Dominion.” On the other hand, those who wanted more expert governance excluded them due to fears about their viability as citizens. Mob violence and

Jim Crow were a reaction to African-American political progress in the South and designed to suppress citizenship (Horton 106-112).¹²

The epistemology of white supremacy, to borrow Bryan Wagner's phrase, buttressed white identity by reaffirming African Americans' basic incompatibility with democratic civilization (312-313). This incompatibility stemmed, I argue, from a basic concern about the threat of "black citizenry" to the category of "citizen" itself. For racist whites, African Americans were either threateningly homogeneous in their racial solidarity, or troublingly incapable of making political judgments that lead to sound party loyalty. Thinking of African-Americans as savages needing stewardship, or as the unified threat of "Negro Domination," white supremacist ideology justified racial violence as the necessary antidote to black political discord (Wagner 331-332). If Chesnut's *The Marrow of Tradition* lodges its account of the Wilmington, North Carolina race riots against white supremacist epistemology, then Thomas Dixon's 1902 novel *The Leopard's Spots* (and its afterlife in D.W. Griffith's 1915 *The Birth of a Nation*) might be interpreted as this epistemology's most public formulation. In addition to presenting white fears of "savage" black citizens, both the novel and the film it inspired present African-American subjects as possessing an alarming racial solidarity. In the novel, blacks act in lock-step with one another to terrorize whites and seize the state and local government. According to the text, mulatto leaders command legions of freedmen to dominate the democratic state for themselves. In the words of the novel's white supremacist protagonist Charlie Gaston, "Supremacy under a party system is always held by a minority. The dominant faction of a party rules the party, and the successful party rules the state. If the Negro only numbered one fifth of the population and they all belonged to one party, they could dictate the

policy of that party.” (Dixon 195). Acting together as a racial interest group, African-Americans could supposedly manipulate the political machinery toward their racially-defined agenda.

Johnson encountered white resistance of African-American citizenship during his time as a newspaper editor and school principal in Jacksonville, Florida. When an 1887 election saw the election of a Republican mayor and five black councilmen, Democrats began calling to dissolve the government of “Negro rule” and replace it with whites instead. Two years later, the campaign succeeded, dealing a serious blow to black political influence in the city. By the 1895 city elections, Democrats controlled the city and controlled its major candidates (Levy 58-59). Johnson later wrote of the 1896 congressional elections as enflaming the “nightmare of the Southern political oligarchy.” A split between the old guard and the new guard of the Democratic Party forced both factions to campaign for the “negro vote,” leaving the party’s fate subject to black political control. As Johnson noted, “the determination to keep this from happening is the single foundation stone on which the political solidarity of the South rests” (*Along this Way* 140). In 1899, The Democratic Party took measures to prevent such a “nightmare” by establishing a primary system that limited participation to white men only. Soon after, in 1901, this “all white” primary rule extended to the entire state, an outcome that essentially removed blacks from state political power (Levy 59-60).

In the “nightmare of the Southern political oligarchy,” African-American political consciousness and racial self-interest rivals, or even supersedes, political solidarity amongst white groups. Indeed, these are the very racial tensions that fed the Democratic Party's efforts to defeat populism throughout the South, split the “negro vote,” and rally

the diverse Anglo-Saxon coalition under one political banner. So durable was this fantasy of African-American domination that Johnson actively refuted such claims in 1925:

“With a free vote in the South the specter of Negro domination would vanish into thin air. There would naturally follow a breaking up of the South into two parties. There would be political light, political discussion, the right to differences of opinion, and the Negro vote would naturally divide itself. No other procedure would be probable. The idea of a solid party, a minority party at that, is inconceivable” (“On Democracy and the Ballot” 51).

The question of African-American citizenship, then, focalized the wider questions about the viability of liberal democracy in the age of massification. White supremacist epistemology justifies its violent exclusion of black citizens by alternately fixating on their imagined chaotic savagery and/or formidable loyalty to a political interest group founded on racial membership. In effect, the color-line projected the anxieties about mass citizenship on to racial categories of identity. The resulting double-vision of African Americans—as both a dominative solid party and an incompetent, easily swayed mass—threatened to unravel the formal operations of government designed to properly assess public will and public good faster than any of twentieth century democracy’s other menacing mass subjects—mobs, crowds, anarchists, socialists, immigrants, and the underclass. The representative operations of U.S. democracy, particularly in the South, confined civil rights out of racist fears about the workings of the representative system. Indeed, this is exactly the nightmare that *The Leopard’s Spots* imagines—black citizens seize public institutions by rigging elections and suppressing the white body politic.¹³ Blinded by racially pressurized projections of liberal democracy’s discontents in the modern era, whites feared the twin threat of Negro Domination and political

incompetence and responded with violence. As Johnson later wrote in “On Democracy and the Ballot,” “The South is in a state of superstition which makes it see ghosts and bogeymen, ghosts which are the creation of its own mental processes” (49).

Johnson’s attitude about politics varied throughout his career, but he consistently maintained that the race problem was a problem of representation. In his editorials for *The Daily American*, he argued against misrepresentations of blacks because, in Levy’s words, “White people knew too little about the ‘best’ black people...and too much about the lowest classes” (54).¹⁴ While Johnson emphasized racial pride and self-help more in these early years, his continual emphasis on recognition and accurate representation of the race worked well with the struggle for African-American citizenship rights. While he did, following Booker T. Washington, encourage some degree of racial “self-help,” he would mostly push white audiences to recognize African-American citizens as a legible and rational group within the body politic that was largely worthy of citizenship already. As early as 1915, he declared in an address to the graduating class of the State Industrial School for Negroes:

The Negro had only to show the native kindly qualities of his heart to prove that he had a human soul. He had only to master the book to prove that he could learn. But the task before him now requires not only that he shall make himself fit for full membership in the American democracy, but also that he shall constrain the great dominant majority to acknowledge and accept him as such. Here lies the chief difficulty. If it were a question only of making ourselves fit, our task would be comparatively easy, for we are daily and in increasing numbers fitting ourselves. But we find that

mere fitness on our part is only one-half of what is to be accomplished; the other half, as I have just said, is to constrain the dominant majority to acknowledge our fitness and accept us as being fit. (“State Industrial School” 11)

Here, Johnson points to the goals of uplift ideology—the demonstration of humanity, or the demonstration of intellect through literacy—and labels them as only “one half” of the struggle. The “chief difficulty,” and I will argue, the goal that Johnson’s writing and activism took up most forcefully, was to “constrain the dominant majority to acknowledge our fitness and accept us as being fit.”¹⁵ While Johnson would continue to promote personal responsibility and racial pride during his NAACP career, Johnson placed the responsibility on the white public to recognize the rational political agency and the basic compatibility with democracy that racialized liberal politics had obscured and Jim Crow laws barred from the public arena. As he stated in a 1923 commencement address, “the Negro” in the United States “must also find a way to compel a recognition of those rights and privileges when he has fitted himself” (“The Larger Success” 58).

Johnson’s position struck a middle road between Washington and Du Bois. Rather than ask, as had Booker T. Washington, that African Americans *prove* their worthiness for citizenship, and rather than demand that African Americans receive citizenship purely out of principle, Johnson would insist that African Americans had already achieved a worthiness that whites did not recognize.¹⁶ The problem of African-American citizenship was thus a problem of accurate representation—a problem that Johnson could remedy through both organizing and representative writing that advertised itself as such. Johnson’s strategy of “accurately” representing African-American life led him to expose

and discredit the foundation of racist ideas that racial misrepresentations helped to circulate.

We can read Johnson's 1917 collection "*Fifty Years*" and *Other Poems* as a less successful attempt to render black life legible to white audiences. Situating the volume as an exposition of black character to white audiences, Brander Matthews' introduction claims that blacks "are not as we are; they stand apart, more or less; they have their own distinct characteristics." As a result, he argues, "[i]t behooves us to understand them as best we can and to discover what manner of people they are" (*Fifty Years* xi-xii). Unlike *The Autobiography*, the poems in this collection do not often take up the color line as an explicit theme. As Matthews explains, the earlier poems demonstrate versatility with conventional Victorian poetic style, while the later poems offer playful snapshots of African-American life through dialect. In this volume, Johnson inherits the signature discontents of black uplift. By demonstrating intellectual ability, Johnson (almost painfully) regurgitates the threadbare conventions that whites expect from the genre. But by writing in dialect, Johnson risks enflaming the minstrel stereotypes that Alain Locke would later reject as limiting and counterproductive.¹⁷ Finding an appropriately racial, yet representationally-versatile medium was a problem that occupied Johnson for most of his career. As we will see, the Ex-Colored Man's attempt to elevate ragtime to universal art marks one such possibility for a less limited representational form. In *The Book of American Negro Poetry*, Johnson specifically criticized dialect as "not capable of giving expression to the varied conditions of Negro life in America," explaining that "the Negro" needs "a form that is freer and larger than dialect, but which will still hold the racial flavor" (xli). *Fifty Years*, then, acts out a failed search for a representative form that

could adequately bridge the epistemological gap between blacks and whites—a failure to address a problem of representation that he had explored earlier in *The Autobiography* and would endeavor to remedy in his later collections of poetry, spirituals, and sermons.

There are some poems in the collection, however, that surprise by moving outside the scripted expectations of conventional or dialect poetry. In “Brothers,” Johnson forcefully dramatizes the white supremacist epistemology that shapes not only the public understanding of black citizens, but also the racial contingency of citizenship itself. Set in the final moments before a black perpetrator is lynched by a white mob, the poem exposes the brutality of the mob's (and the white public for which it stands) limited, self-affirming vision of blacks. The poem proceeds as a dialogue between a white spokesperson and the black victim, sandwiching the black speaker's poetically cadenced lines between the white speaker's harshly conversational speech. The white speaker marks the victim immediately as a non-citizen: “We call you man because you wear / His shape—How are you thus?” (lines 8-9). The victim's human shape momentarily confuses the white speaker's binary epistemology of blacks. On the one hand, the white speaker wonders: “Are you not from / That docile, child-like, tender-hearted race / Which we have known three centuries?” (lines 9-11), a question that restates the familiar stereotype of black subjects as the incapable wards of white stewards. On the other hand, the white speaker insists that the black victim is a “wild animal,” a “beast,” and a “brute.” (lines 3, 6, 7). In the eyes of his white captors, the black victim is doubly (if contradictorily) incapable of citizenship.

The victim's ensuing testimony, then, attempts to dislodge itself from the circumscribing limitations of white-supremacist epistemology. Reversing his

interrogator's harsh blank verse form, the victim's response rethinks the white speaker's schema of racial classification by answering his question (essentially “aren't you a black man?”) by enigmatically stating “I am and I am not”:

I am a thing not new, I am as old
 As human nature. I am that which lurks,
 Ready to spring whenever a bar is loosed;
 The ancient trait which fights incessantly
 Against restraint, balks at the upward climb;
 The weight forever seeking to obey
 The law of downward pull;—and I am more:
 The bitter fruit am I of planted seed;
 The resultant, the inevitable end
 Of evil forces and the powers of wrong.

Lessons in degradation, taught and learned,
 The memories of cruel sights and deeds,
 The pent-up bitterness, the unspent hate
 Filtered through fifteen generations have
 Sprung up and found in me sporadic life.
 In me the muttered curse of dying men,
 On me the stain of conquered women, and
 Consuming me the fearful fires of lust,
 Lit long ago, by other hands than mine.
 In me the down-crushed spirit, the hurled-back prayers

Of wretches now long dead,—their dire bequests.—

In me the echo of the stifled cry

Of children for their bartered mothers' breasts.

I claim no race, no race claims me; I am

No more than human dregs; degenerate;

The monstrous offspring of the monster, Sin;[16]

I am—just what I am.... The race that fed

Your wives and nursed your babes would do the same

To-day, but I— (lines 17-45)

The black victim rephrases the white schema—"The race that fed / Your wives and nursed your babes"—as a historical product rather than the fulfillment of racist stereotype. Yes, the black speaker suggests, I occupied this place of subservience, but I am also the distilled product of generations of brutality, and the imagined "monster" created by white cruelty and fear that has "Sprung up and found in me sporadic life." Insofar as the speaker has been either subservient or violent or brutal or lustful, he has been positioned that way from generations of white practice and stereotype. Thus, his testimony on behalf of his race short circuits his interrogator's racial schemas by linking white epistemology to the history of white racism; white "facts" about the race have no empirical foundation, but are rather produced by racist vision and practice themselves.

In keeping with Wagner's argument, racial violence corrects this aberration in the poem. The final stanzas recount the black victim's burning alive in horrific detail, as well as the mob's orderly division of his remains according to rules of fairness. The shocking violence that concludes the poem only reinforces what the black victim has already

stated: white brutality offers itself as the solution to a problem that white brutality created in the first place. The poem's closing couplet reveals the whites' ignorance on the matter: "What did he mean by those last muttered words, 'Brothers in spirit, brothers in deed are we?'" (lines 67-68). To the reader, however, the connection between the mob's actions, its epistemology, and the victim they produce is clear enough. In the end, "Brothers" points to the racial contingency of citizenship: white citizens hold power over life and due process. Linked to this citizenship, however, is the power over what representations of black life hold sway and which will be dismissed through fire. The problem of race relations, according to the poem, needs the white mob to understand what the reader now sees thrown into relief by the white mob's dramatic ignorance. The task of representative racial writing, then, is to dispel the "state of superstition" which causes white America to "see ghosts and bogeymen, ghosts which are the creation of its own mental processes."

If Johnson's later work asked the white public to recognize a segment of the body politic that its racial anxieties and repressive laws had obscured from public and political life. In the intervening period, from 1906-1912, Johnson worked in the U.S. Consular Services in both Venezuela and Nicaragua. Because Johnson wrote the bulk of *The Autobiography* in Venezuela, we can reread the novel's treatment of the U.S. color line against the racial politics he observed there. In so doing, we can insert Johnson's best-known work into our understanding of his liberal program for racial uplift.

III. The Race Question in Venezuela

If Johnson would begin a phase of racial activism after her returned to the United States in 1913, how did his understanding of race and its importance evolve during his

period of service overseas with the U.S. consular services? Because Johnson wrote the bulk of *The Autobiography* in Venezuela, it makes sense to evaluate the nation's racial politics and their potential influence on Johnson's thinking. This section argues that the landscape of race relations in Venezuela (where Johnson served from 1906-1908) impressed Johnson with the importance of “race” as a category of identity for the purposes of advancing political rights. Realizing the perils of “invisibility” that loomed in a supposedly “non-racial” society, Johnson crafted *The Autobiography* as an aesthetic representation of black life that could both consolidate the object of representation as a constituency and dispel the destructive myths that barred African Americans from citizenship rights.

Studies of Johnson have commented on the potential influence of Venezuelan racial politics on Johnson, albeit such commentary has mostly been brief and superficial. Levy notes that “[t]he impact of Venezuelan race relations helped nurture his thinking and break down his literary inhibitions” and that “The Venezuelan racial situation, with its blending of colors into a local culture, acted as a kind of catalyst” for Johnson's racially themed literary writing that followed. ” (125-126). Sundquist has stated that Venezuela was a nation “whose racial fluidity made the color line of the United States all the more stark,” which in turn allowed Johnson to “imagine an alternative” (Sundquist 47). While it is useful to indicate the differences in opportunity and rights available to people of color in Venezuela vs. the United States, merely indicating the “fluidity” and “blending” involved in Venezuelan racial definitions does not adequately address that nation's struggles with democracy and racial identity in the early 20th century. Venezuela was dealing with its own race problems *vis a vis* its struggle to achieve a more democratic

government. And while the color continuum of Venezuelan society starkly contrasted the rigid racial segregation of the United States, Venezuelan democracy still struggled with the basic relationship race and democratic citizenship. A more nuanced understanding of Venezuelan race relations, as well as its political struggles with democratic representation, gives us a better understanding of what might have shaped Johnson's thinking on the U.S. color line.

Johnson's time in Venezuela fell mostly during the reign of Cipriano Castro, a dictator who held power from 1899 to his exile in 1908. Castro was a mestizo man of dark brown color who hailed from one of the country's most prosperous provinces, Tachira. Trained as both a politician and a military leader, Castro led a successful coup against the Andrade administration under the banner of liberal reform.¹⁸ Yet while the nation enjoyed peace and stability under Castro, his rise to power did nothing to advance liberal democracy in Venezuela. As part of his 1904 constitutional reform, he reneged on his earlier promises of universal and direct suffrage by establishing an elite body of politicians to decide presidential elections by secret ballot (Salas 222). Castro was no democrat, but a regional *caudillo* who maintained national power by offering economic stability and stoking Venezuelan national sentiments against U.S. expansion.

Through the lens of U.S. racial politics, a dark-skinned leader—even a dictator—represented a significant breach of the color line. Johnson encountered Castro and his entourage at the opera early in 1906 and was stunned to see “colored” men serving at the highest levels of government. In a tongue-in-cheek remark to Booker T. Washington, he wrote “when I saw the President's suite, and mingling among the crowd, colored colonels, and generals, and major-generals clad in crimson and gold, with gold handled

swords clinking at their sides, and silver spurs clinking at their heels...I felt like exclaiming with the prophet, 'Lord, mine eyes have seen thy salvation, let now thy servant depart in peace'" (Harlan 28). All joking aside, Johnson confessed a "thrill" in feeling like a part of Castro's official grandeur because there seemed to be no color line excluding him from the positions of highest respect in the land (28-30).

While this encounter impressed Johnson's sense of racial justice—enough that he considered writing a pamphlet comparing "Black Freedmen of North and South America"—his judgments here are misinformed.¹⁹ It is true that the prevailing attitudes about race in Venezuela did not resemble the astounding violence of the U.S. nadir. In fact, Venezuelans were disgusted by the racial violence that occurred in the United States. Regular reports of U.S. lynchings appeared in newspapers, inciting national concern over how Venezuelans would be treated if U.S. influence ever became prominent in Latin America (Wright 74-75). Nevertheless, Venezuela faced a significant "race question" of its own. The great majority of the population (around 70 percent by the mid-twentieth century) belonged to a general mixed racial category of African, Indigenous, and European ancestry known as *pardos* (Wright 2). *Pardos* enjoyed great economic and political mobility. Castro, for example, would have been considered a *pardo*. The *pardo's* racial blending also allowed Venezuelans (and superficial outside observers) to believe that they had established a society free of racism (Wright 3-5).

This apparent acceptance of non-European blood, however, was belied by positivist and cultural nationalist attitudes about pure blacks. The 1890s saw the rise of liberal positivist thinking amongst the Caracas elites. These thinkers, eager to establish a modern democratic state, blamed the nation's lack of progress on "the inability of the

multiracial and black masses to comprehend a democratic system of government” (Wright 10, 76). The emancipation of 1854 left the economic life of many blacks much the same as it was before emancipation. Many remained sharecroppers and manual laborers. Yet these thinkers viewed this systemic pattern as a racial flaw, and as such the solution to the nation's political and economic difficulties would be the creation of a new racial type. By infusing the national bloodline with European stock (accomplished during this time with selective restrictions on immigration), by “whitening” the collective racial composition, the population would be better able to handle the responsibilities of democratic government. Until then, many Venezuelans thought of dictatorship as only way to impose democratic values on the intransigent masses (Wright 79-80). While Castro's regime was not a direct application of these ideals, his attempts to cultivate a unique “latin” consciousness against the “Anglo-Saxons” of the United States, as well as his dictatorial rule, effectively set the stage for his political successor to pursue an aggressive agenda founded on whitening and transitional “temporary” dictatorial power. Juan Vicente Gómez, the “democratic ceaser,” ruled until 1935. (Ewell 113-143).

In the early twentieth century, then, Venezuelan liberal democracy was at a racial-political impasse conceptually similar to the one Johnson had experienced in the United States. While the ideals of liberal democracy (championed famously by the legendary Simón Bolívar) advocated universal citizenship and popular government, the racist mistrust of brown and (especially) pure black peoples' capability as political subjects led to their political repression. Of course, the state-sanctioned discrimination and violence that mark contemporaneous U.S. race relations present the opposite of Venezuela's commitment to miscegenation. Yet in both countries, authoritarian political power served

as the means to quarantine the segments of the body politic deemed unstable because of their racial makeup. Both contexts of racial definition exposed liberal democracy's ideal of universal citizenship as racially contingent. The basis of this citizenship, according to both Jim Crow laws and Venezuelan positivists and cultural nationalists, is not an abstract principle applied equally to all human subjects in the polity, but membership in the racial group imagined to possess the capacities to participate in democracy. In Dahl's terms, this makes the Strong Principle into a question of race. Venezuela's apparent color-blindness—especially its encouragement of miscegenation—reinforced a racially teleological vision of a body politic free of racial minorities.

Though Johnson initially admired what he saw as racial tolerance, its end result would be a complete elimination of African peoples. Johnson wrote of this very problem in an August 1906 letter to Booker T. Washington. With more time to study Venezuelan race relations, Johnson noticed the future extinction of “the pure Negro”:

I judge that soon there will be 'none of him.' In the course of years the Venezuelans will become a homogeneous race of a Spanish type, in color somewhere between a light brown and a yellow. So, the Negro, in spite of the fact that he has not the great obstacle of prejudice to overcome will make no name in Venezuela as a Negro [edit]. But the 'in spite of' is the very reason; he will make no name here because he has no obstacle.

(Johnson to Washington 5).

Ironically, in Johnson's estimation, prejudice creates the environment for “the Negro” to enter public and political life as a “Negro.” Venezuela's future racial homogeneity meant forgetting African peoples and their culture, a fact that troubled Johnson because it

repeated racist historical, and bringing credit and recognition to the race was important to Johnson. As a result, he reversed his earlier excited rhetoric for Venezuelan race relations. “I believe that should the same conditions obtain in the United States he [“the Negro”] would make no name there, but as a racial entity would become lost as he as in Venezuela” (Johnson to Washington 5).

While Venezuelan racial politics offered greater opportunity to people whose “color” would mark them for discrimination in the United States, the understanding of “colored” people as democratic citizens remained similar: as deviations from the ideal racial type, they were unfit to exercise the powers and privileges of citizenship. With “no obstacle of prejudice to overcome,” without a visible confrontation with the forces shaping their marginalization, dark-skinned Venezuelans would disappear, leaving the historical pattern of black erasure intact. Thus, if Johnson gained perspective on U.S. race relations by observing the politics of race in Venezuelan society, that perspective included the possibility of black marginalization without public or political representation. In Johnson's mind, becoming “lost” as a “racial entity” was not an acceptable fate for African Americans, especially since the apparent “tolerance” for people of color was subsumed under a broader national program that aimed to breed out inferior racial elements. Certainly the Jim Crow regime presented a crushing “obstacle” in the path of African-Americans’ efforts for citizenship. Yet the U.S. insistence on racial categories provided an opportunity to confront the racist foundation of democratic citizenship unavailable in “color blind” Venezuela. Johnson saw, in short, an opportunity lost, an apparently color blind society that left the racist definition of citizenship unaltered, and the promise of universal liberal equality unfulfilled. Making a name for the race, then,

was more than race pride in this context. By turning “race” as a homogenizing legal classification into the boundaries of a misunderstood territory, Johnson’s *Autobiography* translates the racial difference that marked non-citizenship into the idiom of democratic representation. The difference between the former and the latter, especially in the context of pluralism’s emergence in the U.S., is that democratic representation’s search for an identifiable and coherent polity to authorize a “popular” government relied on homogenizations of large groups as an *asset* rather than as a bar to citizenship. That is, viewing “race” as a sub-constituency within the body politic, despite its considerable internal variety (which Johnson himself championed), transformed the legal boundaries of discrimination into the recognizably democratic boundaries of a representative territory. A more accurate representation of the race, then, serves to dispel white racist stereotypes, but it also reacts against the “double-threat” of Negro domination/Negro minions by representing African-Americans as viable segment of the body politic—rational, self-critical, economically differentiated, geographically varying, and culturally valuable.

IV. *Autobiography of An Ex-Colored Man*

Johnson's narrator frames race relations as a problem of representation, a problem that his fictional narrator claims to solve by offering a realistic interpretation of race relations based on facts otherwise inaccessible to his white audience. The narrator's goal is to speak as an authoritative representative, as one who knows African-Americans and the problems of the color line. The text leverages the representative textual expectations that surround it to present the color line as a misunderstanding that could be remedied by

the representation that Jim Crow suppresses. Initiating the reader into the “freemasonry” of the race, the author offers “an elevation where he [the reader] can catch a bird’s-view of the conflict which is being waged” (Johnson vii). In short, the narrator entices the reader by promising to render legible the obscure social text of black life in the United States—a site of constant struggle that is “constantly forcing an unascertainable number of fair-complexioned colored people over into the white race” (vii).

As we have already discussed, the speaker does not, as in other examples of African-American autobiography, offer himself as an exemplar of African-American ability or industriousness. Significantly, he condenses his considerable successes into the final, shorter chapter—successes he achieves while passing for a white man. His personal biography reads more like the exploits of a Lindsayan wanderer in search of inspiration rather than the story of a hard-working black man lifting himself up from poverty (the story arc of many other black autobiographies). The narrator spends time as a free-spending factory worker, a careless gambler, and the dependent travel partner of the “millionaire.” Neither does the narrator succeed in his childhood dream to “be a great man, a great colored man, to reflect credit on the race, and gain fame for myself” (21). The narrator is a failed exemplar: his artistic ambitions fizzle in the face of mob violence, and he abandons his African-American identity in exchange for a “white man’s success.” It is precisely these failures, however, that position the narrator as the ideal interpreter of the African-American racial territory for his white audiences. Johnson’s narrator takes up the role of the remorseful defector, a fallen member whose only redemption is to share the knowledge that inspired his corruption. Consequently, the narrator frames his autobiography as a confession of knowledge ordinarily forbidden to his implicitly white

audience.

The publisher's preface offers to initiate the reader into the “freemasonry” of the race by drawing aside a “veil” that obscures the actual conditions of the “ten millions of them” in all their variation. “Not before,” says the preface, “has a composite and proportionate presentation of the entire race, embracing all of its various groups and elements, showing their relations with each other and to the whites, been made” (preface). Invoking the “veil,” Johnson references Du Bois’ well-known spatial metaphor describing the problem of African-American identity. Yet upon closer inspection, we see that Johnson's use of the “veil” implies a different politics of representation than those DuBois suggests. For both writers, the “veil” signals an internal conflict of identity produced by the racist pressures of white culture. Johnson's narrator notes this “dual personality” stems from the structuring effect of “coloredness” on consciousness. This pressure, he explains, is what “makes the colored people of this country, in reality, a mystery to the whites ” because blacks are always in the act of performing this “dualism”; they disclose one side of themselves to others in the “freemasonry,” and the other side to whites. “I have often watched,” says the narrator, “even ignorant colored men under the cover of broad grins and minstrel antics this dualism in the presence of white men” (9). For Johnson, however, the veil's second meaning—a partition between races—differs from Du Bois because of the novel's intended audience. Where Du Bois wrote to “the talented tenth,” Johnson writes directly to white audiences. The veil becomes in Johnson's formulation the cover of the novel itself, a barrier of ignorance that obscures whites' understanding of blacks that the novel can remedy with its “composite sketch.” As a spatial metaphor, the veil repositions the black “object” of representation

relative to the observational standpoint of white observers.

This formulation of the veil allows the narrator to package his own racial flexibility as the grounds for his representational authority to his white audiences. The surface of African-American life that whites perceive, says the narrator, is merely the face of a protective dissemblance shared by all colored people. Having personally witnessed multiple, particular instances of this phenomenon as a member of the “freemasonry,” and yet also having lived among whites (indeed, having been mistaken for white), the narrator understands both the true nature of blacks’ everyday experience of race relations *and* the inadequate interpretive position that whites occupy. While he states that “colored people of this country know and understand the white people better than the white people know and understand them” (10), *only* the ex-colored man understands *why* whites do not understand colored people. As a failed exemplar of African Americans, he is both an exception and a member, a fluid state of identity that allows him to both speak from the most intimate epistemological position within the race while simultaneously remaining an exterior representative that narrates the cultural and ideological contours of the race.

Nowhere does the ex-colored man leverage this privileged observational vantage point better than the smoking car scene in Chapter X. Traveling from Nashville to Atlanta to begin the work of harvesting African-American culture in its “primitive state” (81), the narrator steps from his Pullman car into the “smoker” to enjoy a cigar. Of course, as Sundquist has pointed out, the ex-colored man's presence in both the Pullman car and the “smoker” signal that he is passing for white on the train ride rather than riding Jim Crow (Sundquist 10). This representational slight-of-hand positions the narrator as the audience for a frank discussion on the race question between an ex-Union soldier and a Texan. The

novel is filled with moments like this, where characters encountered serve as the thinly veiled mouthpieces for stock arguments about the race question. The “millionaire”’s parting exhortation on the race question, for example, presents the liberal conservative view that any attempts to remedy the race question only exacerbate its evils (a Jim Crow Liberal). In the smoking car, the Texan and the ex-Union soldier dramatize the larger national debate between reactionary Darwinist liberals and progressive liberals. The Texan parrots the Darwinist belief that Anglo-Saxon dominance is a product of racial merit: “...no race in the world has ever been able to stand competition with the Anglo-Saxon. The Anglo-Saxon race has always been and always will be masters of the world” (75-76). His suspicion of black citizens splits into two fears. On the one hand, he echoes the familiar mistrust of black political agency because “You freed that nigger and you gave him the ballot, but you couldn't make a citizen out of him. He don't know what he's voting for, and we buy 'em like so many hogs. You're giving 'em education, but that only makes slick rascals out of them” (75). On the other hand, the Texan equates political equality with a concerted takeover of white private space: “You want us to treat niggers as equals. Do you want to see 'em sitting around our parlors? Do you want to see a mulatto South? To bring it right home to you, would you let your daughter marry a nigger?” (75). Political equality, for the Texan, is a slippery slope that threatens to entitle an “inferior” race to invade (and completely transform) Southern life, from its private parlors to its overall racial identity.

The ex-Union soldier argues his progressive liberal perspective (he emphasizes political equality and intellectual stewardship without any of the progressive suspicion of black voters) persuasively through a litany of counter-examples. As a rational deliberator,

the ex-Union soldier overwhelms the Texan. If racial discrimination could be extinguished by reason and rhetoric, then arguments like the soldier's would win out against the Texan's unsupported positions. The Texan cites "facts," but the bedrock of his defense of racial segregation is his own limited contact with African Americans. He admits to knowing hardly any educated Negroes, and the bulk of the "facts" (that is, *actual* Negroes) the Texan encounters are the agriculturally-centered country people that narrator later describes during his exploration of the South: "...dull, simple people, the great majority of them hard working; in their relations with whites, submissive, faithful, and often affectionate, negatively content with their lot..."(80). The Texan's racial politics therefore exemplify a much broader problem with U.S. democracy because the racial typologies that underpin his position on black citizenship stem from an inadequate understanding of the race itself. The narrator clarifies this in his reflections on the incident: "The Texan's position does not render things so hopeless, for it indicates that the main difficulty of the race question does not so much lie in the actual condition of the blacks as it does in the mental attitude of the whites; and a mental attitude, especially one not based on truth, can be changed more easily than actual conditions" (78).

This "mental attitude" is precisely the novel's target, a mindset the text hopes to alter by leveraging both the realist conventions that circumscribe it and the narrator's chameleonic position as observer and interpreter of the color line. By accurately representing this misunderstood segment of the polity, by analyzing the root of racial misunderstanding in the United States, the narrator aims to alter the white public's mindset about African-American citizenship. The Ex-Colored Man's goal, therefore, is not simply to advertise the merits of the race, or to take that burden upon himself as an

exemplar. While he does call attention to the unacknowledged successes of the race, he does so as part of a broader national taxonomy of a complex and variegated social terrain. The publisher's preface promises exactly this: "...a composite and proportionate presentation of the entire race, embracing all of its various groups and elements, showing their relations with each other and to the whites..." (vii). The "truth" of the composite conditions of the race, the narrator expects, will alter the collective mindset that denies black citizenship based on inadequate understanding of the race, whether it be the Texan's vision of mentally incapable and sexually invasive citizens or the pervasive stereotype of the "happy-go-lucky, laughing, shuffling, banjo-picking being" (79) or the "lazy, loafing, good-for-nothing darkies" in the streets of Washington that the black doctor points out in Washington, D.C. (73). The realist autobiographical voice allows the narrator to sketch the intricacies of the race without running into the problematics of uplift representation he might encounter as a novelist: "His efforts to elevate himself socially are looked upon as a sort of absurd caricature of 'white civilization.'" He continues: "A novel dealing with colored people who lived in respectable homes and amidst a fair degree of culture" would be "taken in a comic opera sense" (79). The fictional autobiography carefully exploits the line between "fact" and "fiction" because white audiences resist the idea that African-American life could approximate white conventions, or that African-American themes could comprise the themes of official art forms like novels.

The narrator's ethnographic taxonomies of black racial classes erode the commonplaces about black life by revealing hidden intricacies in race relations and the complexities of the race's social structure. In his account of Jacksonville (which he cites as typical of "every Southern community"), the narrator points to three classes "not so

much in respect to themselves but in respect to their relations with the whites" (35). This description moves from the most visible class—those “desperate” “creatures of conditions” that “hate everything covered by white skin, and in return...are loathed by whites” (36)—to the most invisible class composed of “independent workmen and tradesmen, and of the well-to-do and educated colored people” who “live in a little world of their own” (36). According to the narrator, while the first class “often dominates public opinion concerning the whole race,” the latter class is hardly real to whites, and when it is, whites misinterpret black advancement in money and education as “putting on airs” and attempts to “spite” whites. This taxonomy of black classes reveals that “the greater part of the friction in the South” is not caused by whites “having a natural antipathy to Negroes as a race,” but is more likely due to “an acquired antipathy to Negroes in certain relations to themselves” (37). In other words, Southern whites share the Texan's essential flaw—they draw conclusions about the entirety of the race from contact with only one class of it. The homogenizing logic of Jim Crow conflates “the very colored people who most need and who could best appreciate sympathetic cooperation” with the most visible “desperate classes” (37). In other words, the lack of accurate information about African-Americans leads the Texan to draw his conclusions on partial information. The problem of race relations, according to the narrator, is not a matter of insurmountable prejudice, but a breakdown of adequate representation between blacks and whites. Following this rubric of bad representation making bad race relations, the narrator contrasts the more “visible” elements of the race with the more advanced, “hidden” elements throughout the novel—his early observations about life in Georgia, his account of the “club” in New York, and his stay with the Doctor in Washington D.C. are other notable examples.

These and other depictions of social and political variation within the race also confront the racist stereotype of black political homogeneity. As we have seen, white fear of “Negro domination” hinges on a racist fear of unchangeable racial loyalty against whites. In *The Autobiography*, the narrator calls attention to the way that geographical and cultural differences mold African-American citizens, differentiating them from fellow members of their race. Comparing educated Northern African Americans to their Southern counterparts, he notes “In speech and thought they were genuine Yankees.” The narrator goes on to extend the same conclusions about “the Negro” to international examples: “It is remarkable, after all, what an adaptable creature the Negro is. I have seen the black west India gentleman in London, and he is in speech and manners a perfect Englishman. I have seen natives of Haiti and Martinique in Paris, and they are more Frenchy than a Frenchman. I have no doubt that the Negro would make a good Chinaman, with the exception of the pigtail” (71). In the narrator's words, the same national pressures that mold the speech and thought of American, French, and Chinese citizens equally molds “the Negro” into membership with those national peoples. If Johnson would later argue in “Democracy and the Ballot,” that “With a free vote in the South the specter of Negro domination would vanish into thin air,” then *The Autobiography* makes an earlier case for a similar level of African-American independence from any imagined racial agendas.

By staking its claim to racial realism, by couching itself as a series of accurate observations about the race and race relations, the text abandons the possibility of addressing the color line through experimental art. The Ex-Colored Man's aborted attempt to create “classical” music from the core of African-American folk culture aimed

to capitalize on an opportunity similarly available to “the future Negro novelist or poet”: the chance to “give the country something new and unknown in depicting the life, the ambitions, the struggles, and the passions” of the race (79). Like these novelists and poets, the Ex-colored Man as racial composer could overturn stereotype by reconciling African-American cultural themes with “universal” aesthetic forms. If “Music is a universal art,” as the millionaire benefactor declares, then the Ex-Colored Man would extend these universal principles of value to “all the joys and sorrows, the hopes and ambitions, of the American Negro” (67, 69). The novel, poetry, or music that can render African-American life in “classic” form thus extends the abstract equality of aesthetic merit to marginalized subjects and subject matter. The “simple rules of justice” the narrator invokes on behalf of fair representation in the smoker car also govern the acceptance of representative art into universal canons of value. To create such a work of art, then, is to perform metaphorically the enfranchisement of African-American life. The Ex-Colored Man's music might have been the representational medium Johnson would later talk about in his later collections of black folk writing—racially representative, yet more versatile than dialect. The novel's exploration of such possibilities positioned it well for its second life as a Renaissance text. Before the Renaissance invigorated the market for African-American culture, however, the novel's call for a flexible racial art would have seemed more visionary. Johnson does not give his 1912 audience a selection of racial music, but an account of that music's failure. Yet in documenting its protagonist's failure, the text comprises an alternative representational medium beyond dialect or music. The speaker offers this account in the place of such revolutionary art. His is a realistic account of artistic possibility, an authoritative survey of what is and what could

be that itself aims to alter the white “mental attitude” about black citizenship.

Fittingly, then, the narrator abandons his musical ambitions in the face of the racist forces that animate his realist representative effort. At the lynching, he sees for himself the racial contingency of citizenship in U.S. democracy. The “orderly manner” of the crowds lynching preparations show that the practices of white racism trump the constitutionally guaranteed rights of black citizens. The contradiction between the ideals of democracy and its actual practice fill the narrator with a twofold shame: “Shame that I belonged to a race that could be so dealt with; and shame for my country, that it, the great example of democracy to the world, should be the only civilized, if not the only state on earth, where a human being would be burned alive...I knew that it was shame, unbearable shame. Shame at being identified with a people that could with impunity be treated worse than animals. For certainly the law would restrain and punish the malicious burning alive of animals” (88-90). The narrator’s horror at the failure of America’s democratic example is also the shame of belonging to a marginalized race within that failed system. The charred remains of the lynched victim announce that the foundational principles of democratic society—equality before the law, the assurance of rights for all citizens, participation in public life and the public good—are not universal principles at all, but a set of systematic lies propping up white power. As Johnson would later write as part of his anti-lynching campaign, mob violence was a direct contradiction to a “free and orderly representative democracy” (“Lynching” 75).²⁰

The narrator's decision to choose ex-coloration is braced by this realization. Rather than champion the citizenship of African-Americans, rather than seek an alternative means to remedy the representational rift that fans the flames of such racism

in the first place, the narrator solves the problem of citizenship for himself by passing for white. His choice to “forsake” his race is motivated by the basic indignity of occupying such a contradictory position in democratic society. Where “coulouredness” formerly signified a terrain of culture to be represented through music and reconciled with the universal standards of white culture, it is now the sign of democracy's failure; where it was once the boundaries of an invisible citizenry that cries out for representation, it is now a reminder of why blacks (acting as blacks) would always fail in such representative efforts. What kind of a reception will these crowds, or the icy northern whites he subsequently encounters, really offer to African-American culture? How would the whites react to music if this is their reaction? “The eternal principles of right” that the narrator accords to those “publicly fighting the cause of their race” matter little when the laws of the land allow such a terrible fate. The melancholy account of his ex-coloration retraces the possibilities for uplift he never seized. Yet his retrospective examination of African-American representation maps the flaws and solutions to racial representation in democracy that produced his tragic life.

V. Conclusion

In a 1929 essay entitled “Our Democracy and the Ballot,” Johnson called upon African Americans to pursue “the objective of entering into, not staying out of the body politic” (“Our Democracy” 145). By 1930, Johnson had retired from his NAACP duties, leaving behind him a national organization with influence, institutional structure, and membership vastly expanded since the days in 1916 when he first began work as field secretary. Johnson's later interest in lynching helps us to understand the issues at play in

the race question. Lynching was the intersection of issues around citizenship—not only the denial of rights by burning itself, but because it was part of a regime of racial violence that denied blacks access to political representation. Lynching occluded black citizenship on two levels because it denied them the legal protection against murder and entitlement to due process, and it prevented blacks from exercising political representation through the ballot. Representing African-Americans as a segment of the body politic, as well as the intricacies of race relations along the color line, was a lasting priority for Johnson. This project of public representation included literary writing, although he was more invested in the Dyer anti-lynching bill than he was in the Harlem Renaissance. Nevertheless, Johnson wrote in his preface to *The Book of American Negro Poetry*, and as he would later echo in a 1924 essay, art played a pivotal role in proving African-American fitness for citizenship.²¹ Certainly, his literary writing—from his poems to *The Autobiography* to his collections of folk art—were invested politically in resolving the problem of the color line. Reading Johnson as an early-bird to the Renaissance's later use of literary writing for uplift, however, misunderstands the relationship between his writing and his racial politics. For Johnson, literary writing also worked as a forum to represent African American citizens in the absence of means suppressed by Jim Crow. As he wrote later in the same in the same preface, “The status of the Negro in the United States is more a question of national mental attitude toward the race than actual conditions” (9). Literature was not only a means to accomplish fitness for citizenship, but a representative mechanism for showing a fitness that already existed—the “actual conditions.”

Johnson’s developing politics of representation and citizenship provide a different

interpretive context for the literary genre he consciously employs in *The Autobiography*. His writings suggest that he became increasingly aware of the contradictions between the color line and stated core principles; citizenship's racial contingency violated the abstract, universal laws of justice that supposedly underpinned liberal government. In Venezuela, he saw first hand the importance of "race" as a category of representation in collective politics. Ironically, without a color line, there could not be an effective confrontation with the racist ideologies that linked African blood to unstable, unviable citizens for democracy. The U.S. color line founded itself on a similar suspicion of black citizenship. As a result, Johnson returned from the Consular Service with a different racial politics. Rather than advocate self help and education for the race, he would spend the next fifteen years struggling for the recognition of African-American citizenship rights. For Johnson, representation was key. Racism, he argued, stemmed from a lack of understanding exacerbated by stereotype and perpetuated by the cultural regime of Jim Crow. *The Autobiography* reflects these maturing concerns in its ethnographic approach to the "sphinx" of the "Negro race." At the very least, the interpretive context I have traced allows us to more productively read Johnson's politics alongside his most well-known literary effort without resorting to the postmodern gristmill of instability, play, and subversion.

As an act of literary production, however, *The Autobiography* points to the specific capacities of literary writing to intervene in politics. It is nothing new to suggest that literature, as a field of cultural production, comprised an important arena where representation and identity were contested in the early twentieth century. Yet the case of Johnson's novel hones this general claim to the specific concerns of African-American

uplift. Within the narrow strictures of racial realism, against the heavy expectations that white audiences imposed on the “exemplar,” *The Autobiography* maps the curiosity of its readers on to the dynamic of political representation. It takes the audience’s expectations for black legibility and reroutes them though the political problem of racist disenfranchisement.

NOTES

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1. Jarrett cites Madhu Dubey, who explains: “[p]olitical claims about African-American literature have always depended on realist aesthetics, from the documentary impulse of the slave narratives to the reflections principles prescribed by the cultural nationalist program.” See Dubey 44.
 2. See Andrews 85-90.
 3. See Adrande 7. According to Adrande, this reaction stems from what Houston Baker terms a “tight place,” a speaking position which automatically hems in the possibilities for African-American written expression.
 4. For more on the representational link between text and subject matter in racial realism, see Jarrett 29-52.
 5. See Andrews 87.
 6. See Gunnell 105. As Gunnell notes, pluralism would not become a dominant ideology, or even an accepted reality until much later in U.S. history.
 7. Johnson was fond of drawing on “facts” for rhetorical authority in discussions about racial injustice and racial progress. See, for example, “Lynching, America’s National Shame” and “The Legal Status of Negro Americans.” Footnote about the language of

his anti-lynching campaign rhetoric—face the facts.

8. If Johnson were an experimental literary radical, this complicity with convention might be difficult to accept. Yet while Johnson later became an influential figure in the Harlem Renaissance, his bedrock cultural politics differed from those later popularized by the Renaissance. Hutchinson has argued that “The Harlem renaissance program of using the arts to advance freedom and equality derived...from a belief in the central role of aesthetic experience in the achievement of new forms of solidarity and understanding, and thus in the transformation and national integration of cultures” (90). The cultural matrix of pragmatism, cultural pluralism, and Boasian anthropology redefined the role of aesthetic experience in national culture. African-American writing, in short, participated in a collective redefinition of the “American Nation” by providing new points of identification for a pluralist nationalism.
9. See Johnson's advice to his own voters to resist propaganda in “The Race Problem and Peace.” See also “A Negro Looks at Politics,” where he calls the Republican Party “a the essay where he calls the Republican Party a “Federal-office-holding oligarchy” (117).
10. See *Along this Way* 378, Levy 107-109.
11. See Horton 115. See Also Cell.
12. For more on Darwinian liberalism, see also Horton 37-60. For Johnson’s involvement on these issues via his newspaper work, see Levy 59.
13. See Dixon 86, 104-117. In the novel, local politicians Hogg and Legree disenfranchise white voters and give ballots to easily manipulable freedmen who, in one of the novels most shocking scenes, think that “elective franchise” is a substance

that can be placed in a bag (104-105). Vowing at all costs to steal the majority from whites, the conspirators promise to “disfranchise more aristocrats and enfranchise the dogs” if necessary (105). The election to empower the Hogg and Legree's Republican party is further fixed by manipulating publicity and voting precincts. Fifteen electoral precincts are consolidated into three, all located in “negro districts” of the state, while the location of polling places is kept secret to all except for party accomplices (107).

14. Levy goes on to say: “[Johnson] went on to criticize one of the local white papers for implying that all blacks were going to engage in a pie-eating contest... Judge each of us, Johnson pleaded, not on the basis of color, but on our class behavior. Then treat us accordingly (54-55).
15. For more on the contradictions and challenges of racial uplift ideology, see Gaines.
16. Compare this, for example, to Booker T Washington's famous 1895 “Atlanta Compromise” speech to chapter III of *The Souls of Black Folk*. See DuBois 60-75
17. See Locke 2.
18. See Ewell 98. See also Salas 114.
19. See Harlan 29.
20. Johnson repeats this phrase from Harding’s “The Return to Normalcy,” a speech given to a special session of Congress in 1921.
21. Johnson writes in the original preface “The world does not know that a people is great until that people produces great literature and art.” See Johnson, *Book of American Negro Poetry* 9.

**Conclusion: “Tell Me What Democracy Looks Like”: Rethinking Democracy
Toward the 1930’s and Beyond**

This dissertation has treated literary reevaluations of the sovereign people during the age of massification in the United States, from 1890 to 1930. The careers of Hamlin Garland, Vachel Lindsay, and James Weldon Johnson do not immediately strike contemporary audiences for their engagement in this problematic. Recontextualizing their work, however, allows us to understand the engagement between literature, culture, and mass politics (a pattern that scholars have most consistently identified in the 1930s) as a sustained cultural struggle in the United States whose fault lines stretch back before the 1930’s. In his 1936 book-length poem *The People, Yes*: Sandburg’s described Lincoln (a figure he admired) as saying “Yes to the paradoxes of democracy, / Yes to the hopes of government / Of the people by the people for the people” (Sandburg 81). These lines of poetry call into view democracy’s hopes and its implicit failures. To say yes to “the paradoxes of democracy” is to similarly embrace the “hopes of government of the people by the people for the people.” To believe in popular government, these lines suggest, is to accept the basic contradictions of government controlled by a sovereign people.

Elsewhere in the volume, Sandburg described “the people” with language that called attention to the conflicting possibilities within them: “The people is a tragic and comic two-face: hero and hoodlum” (220). For Sandburg, “the people” were both the engine and the failure of American democracy, both the greatest hope for advancing mankind and the everyday demonstration of apathetic toil. Sandburg, who had lived and written through the decades that this dissertation studies, saw a tension underlying the rhetorical

invocations of “the people” that was long in development. “The paradoxes of democracy” pointed not only to slavery’s clear contradiction of the Enlightenment doctrine of universal citizenship, but also to the long historical struggle over the meaning and civic capabilities of “the people” themselves:

The people yes

The people will live on.

The learning and blundering people will live on.

They will be tricked and sold and again sold

And go back to the nourishing earth for rootholds,

The people so peculiar in renewal and comeback,

You can't laugh off their capacity to take it.

The mammoth rests between his cyclonic dramas. (219)

Sandburg’s invocation of the historical “people” pinpoints their advances and retreats over time, a narrative of popular struggle punctuated by cycles of betrayal, incompetency, resilience, and resistance. The recurring “cyclonic dramas” swirl around the unfulfilled potential of popular governance, collective action, and individual independence that informed America’s popular mythology of itself.

The year of 1936-1937 marks what Michael Denning has called the “second surge” in Popular Front activity in the United States. As he explains, this was the year that the term “Popular Front” was coined to label a growing movement of leftist popular politics that variously mounted “offenses and retreats” against a regime of anti-democratic capitalism that had produced the depression and sought desperately to protect its interests during the following decade (Denning 24). The Popular Front, says Denning,

was an “extraordinary proliferation of populist rhetorics” during the crisis era of the Great Depression. The “disarray in political and cultural representation generated new forms of politics and culture, each attempting to reconstruct the nation by representing the ‘people,’ to speak for the people by depicting the people” (126). The waves of strikes and sit-ins, the expansion of working class press and readership, and the rise of working class and minority representation in writing were part of a wide reevaluation of the people and their position of sovereignty within a democratic system that appeared increasingly flawed in the wake of the 1929 Crash. F.O. Matthiessen, in fact, participated in Popular Front intellectual circles interested in the form and meaning of “the people” throughout the 1930s.¹ Matthiessen’s search for a signature “American” literature unsurprisingly resulted in the “discovery” of a vein of U.S. writing that had somehow succeeded in channeling and representing “the people.” Literature, for Matthiessen and other Popular Front writers and intellectuals, served as a key representative mechanism for this project that wanted (to repeat Denning) “to speak for the people by depicting the people.”

Literary scholars have registered much of the range and nuance of this cultural debate, especially for the political left. Walter D. Mignolo’s *American Culture Between the Wars* builds a case for the relationship between culture and politics. Literary writing and visual art, Mignolo argues, *participate* in politics and society rather than transcend them (Mignolo 52). Paula Rabinowitz has examined 1930s documentary aesthetics not just for their “engaged reportage” (Rabinowitz 10) interested in pinpointing problems that need solving, but also for their capacity to define the left to itself, as projects of identity (10-11). Cary Nelson has argued for the various registers in which “political” writing (in

Nelson's case, poetry) could operate—as collective utterances disembodied from individual authors, as the expression and creation of collective knowledge and collective action, and as public acts rooted in the causes their writers pursued personally.²

Broadly considered, literary and cultural studies of the 1930s ask us to rethink the role that aesthetic work might play in a political and cultural context of crisis and urgency for Western capitalist democracy. We now recognize the interplay between radical politics (with designs on reimagining the United States as a democratic enterprise) and aesthetic production (representative acts mobilized across a terrain of shifting collective identities for Leftists, the working classes, women, African-Americans, etc.). Literary writing and other forms of aesthetic expression served as vital arenas for defining shared meaning, whether that meaning be the occluded identity of exploited miners in West Virginia (as in Muriel Rukeyser's *The Book of the Dead*) or the vision of a democratic nation without the injustices that had brought about the 1929 crash (such as Langston Hughes' *Goodbye Christ* or Dos Passos' *U.S.A. Trilogy*). In each of these cases, it has become possible to talk about writing and aesthetics as part of both a critical reevaluation of democracy as well as mechanism through which to mobilize possibilities for democratic change.

If the 1930s saw one of the best-documented attempts to redefine that mythology and reclaim its potential, the literary case studies of this dissertation reveal an earlier turn of such “cyclonic dramas” (to repeat Sandburg's metaphor). These earlier (and less recognizably leftist) efforts to answer the question “who are the people?” have received little scholarly attention. As a result, we have understood less the patterns of engagement between literary writing and democratic politics in the late-nineteenth and early twentieth

centuries. The brewing discontents about democratic organization and popular sovereignty inspired writers to adapt forms of literary expression to the task of creating alternative means of collective representation. Garland's Veritism, Lindsay's New Localism, and Johnson's racial writing all rethink the possibilities of popular democracy in an age of massification by discovering and offering to represent some segment of the body politic. The decades between 1890 and 1930 marked the period when "the masses" were hardened into social problem and a political challenge to popular sovereignty; the masses not only as Marx's proletariat, but as an emerging multitude that simultaneously demanded political power and provoked fears about their viability as citizens.

Much work remains to be done if we are to fully account for the durability of the problematic of representation throughout time and the breadth of positions within culture at a given moment in time. As I have suggested in this project, the struggle for meaning of popular sovereignty, the sovereign people, and the potential to create mechanisms of representation for "the people" stretches even further back than the nineteenth century, to the foundation of U.S. democracy. This dissertation treats but one chapter in a longer story about the relationship of "the people" to democracy. And while I have intentionally selected figures who do not fit tidily into political categories that we might celebrate or revile today, I have not significantly addressed another crucial domain of cultural activity—conservative rhetoric and culture and its engagement with the problem of popular sovereignty. Further work on racial fantasies of the state (such as the Ku Klux Klan), the nostalgic conservatism of the Southern Agrarians, the pseudo-fascism of Distributism (and its brief life in Seward Collins' *American Review*), and open support for fascism in the United States remain unexplored intellectual currents of the past that

are equally complex in their engagement with the problems of democratic organization.

It remains for other scholars to explore the manifold ways that these principles were questioned, debated, recast, redeployed, and adapted to the practical challenges of governing collectively. Yet even studying a relatively small slice of writers who engaged the problematic of representation and popular sovereignty from the past prompts us to examine this same problematic in the present moment.

“This is what democracy looks like?” Democratic Representation Today

In November of 2009, I participated in a TA strike at the University of Illinois that stemmed from an impasse in contract negotiations between that graduate employees’ union and the university administration. In the two days that grad employees walked the picket lines, one chant became a favorite: “Tell me what democracy looks like,” the chant leader would shout, while the rest of the picketers would shout back “THIS is what democracy looks like.” I heard this chant again when I traveled to Madison, Wisconsin to support union protests against Governor Scott Walker’s anti-union, anti-public sector budget bill in February 2011. In Madison, the chants were far more frequent, passionate, and self-assertive. “This really IS what democracy looks like,” the choral refrain said with the confidence of being public assembly many times larger than the one that chanted in Urbana-Champaign. These crowd gatherings, which numbered over 100,000 according to police estimates at the time, lent themselves well to being photographed and captioned with the refrain from the popular chant. Real democracy, the chant and the chanters seemed to say, appears when the people rise up in collective action against tyranny. Or, yet another interpretation might be that democracy, as a collective decision-making

process, works best when people act together in support of a decision, as they did to reject Walker's budget bill. Indeed, much of this is true, or at least I felt it to be very true when I was there chanting with all the rest. Historically, we could place this insistence on the meaning of democracy as a justifiable return to the Whig tradition of extra-legislative assemblies whose power the Constitutional Convention attempted to limit by consolidating power into elected assemblies—the very type of assemblies that, in Wisconsin, had chosen to push policy against the grain of public support. Distributed power, distributed decision making—that is what democracy should look like, the crowd's chant implied, even if its inception in our federal constitution and its subsequent implementation in our political culture suggest otherwise.

Of course, democracy is more than giant assemblies, but giant assemblies are seductive for the same reason that they are invigorating—they are moments of visible consensus, moments where individuals seem to represent themselves by individually authorizing a political cause with their presence. In celebrating public assemblies for being “what democracy looks like,” we also celebrate an impossible purity of representation in the political process. Unlike mediated representative arrangements that obscure individual expression, public assemblies allow us to imagine that each body in the body politic is expressing its own political truth right there in front of our eyes. Perhaps unsurprisingly, another popular saying from the various speakers at the rallies that punctuated the all-day protests in Madison was “the people have spoken.” As we have seen, however, the voice of the people is not so easily captured, even when 120,000 bodies pack a city square and share similar political goals. The fantasy of unmediated representation that subtends celebrations of crowd gatherings and grassroots action

glosses over the complexity of reading the political will of “the people” and translating that will into specific policy. Radical mass-reactions to political crisis are not a substitute for a system of collective decision-making.

How, then, are we to split the difference between James Madison and Madison, Wisconsin? If today we imagine a democratic system that actually works by creating a government of the people, by the people, and for the people, then we continue to pursue a horizon that has yet to materialize, a possibility for democracy that hinges on the observable and knowable category of “the people” itself. To base the viability of any democratic model on its perceived success or failure (and it is always a failure) to totally and accurately mimic the “will of the people” is to doom any democratic state. After all, the ultimate instability and uncertainty that characterizes the “political reality” of the people cannot be adequately reflected in any agency that wields state power on their behalf. Today’s retreat into increasingly radical (and increasingly fanciful) theories of mass democracy, however, abandons the project of representative democracy before it ever really began. At a time when elections are won with multi-million dollar budgets and effective branding, we have to question whether the role of “representative” is truly accessible to all citizens. Indeed, this problem stretches back to the late-nineteenth and early twentieth century, when politicians were also criticized for being good at getting elected, but not much else.³ If choosing political representatives has always risked empowering people with little interest in the welfare of the state, then this problem stems from the inadequacy of available candidates and the social, cultural, and economic barriers that prevent a wider range of citizens from running for office. Literary writing seems particularly appealing as a means to both position oneself as representative and

represent “the people” if the official pathways to political control are consistently blocked. Why not radically equalize access to political office?

Ultimately, there is no perfect solution to the problem of representation other than to continually understand it as a problem in need of our attention and our most creative solutions. Recognizing the impossibility of speaking for a fantasized “people” does not diminish the imperative for democratic states to remain accountable to the public, nor does it absolve leaders from their responsibility to solicit the voices of the governed. Letting go of “the people” and the unattainable standard of accuracy for which it stands lets us focus instead on the fairness, humanity, and sustainability of our politics. In a day and age when manufactured or illusory “popular” mandate has been used as the justification for horrifyingly undemocratic acts of government, we have to remember that democracy is a means to a free society, not a sufficient justification for unfreedom.

1. See Denning 5 and 424.

2. See C. Nelson 1-11.

3. For one outspoken critic of democracy’s failures in the 1930s, see Cram’s *The End of Democracy*, particularly p. 182.

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