

Ugly Americanism:
American Literature, Culture, and Aesthetic Judgment

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A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor
of Philosophy in the Department of English at Brown University

Providence, R.I.

May 2020

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This dissertation by Dashiell Wasserman is accepted in its present form
by the Department of English as satisfying the dissertation requirement
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

As Homer Atkins—the original *Ugly American*, whose engineer’s hands “always reminded him that he was an ugly man”—knew well, there are innumerable invisible fingerprints across any major project. Accordingly, I am grateful to acknowledge those friendships, mentorships, and debts accumulated during my years of reading and writing about ugliness—in short, the hands that have helped shape this project.

Perhaps most important of all, I thank my dissertation committee, whose influence on me I will surely only fully understand in the coming years. My advisor Tamar Katz has been a force of nature and a source of wry humor ever since I was her Teaching Assistant, and, as my chair, she has so thoughtfully helped me become accountable to my ideas while remaining passionate about making connections between them. Stuart Burrows was an instrumental reader and provided incredibly thoughtful feedback throughout the various iterations of the project; I fondly remember our early conversations about the dissertation at Café Hugo in Paris in 2017. Ravit Reichman has been a mentor in so many capacities throughout my time at Brown, and it seems only fitting that I would end my time at the University with her reading over my shoulder.

I also thank those in the English Department who have impacted me through seminars, conversations, and/or acts of kindness: Amanda Anderson, Paul Armstrong, Tim Bewes, Jim Egan, Phil Gould, Coppélia (and Mario) Kahn, Jacques Khalip, Kevin Quashie, Rick Rambuss, Jonathan Readey, and Ada Smailbegović. I am also delighted to thank Marianne Costa, Lorraine Mazza, Marilyn Netter, Suzie Nacar, and Ellen Viola—collectively, the soul of

the Department—who gleefully perform the miracle of ensuring that our workplace and programs runs smoothly each day.

I also wish to thank David Wills in the Department of French for our time spent at the Derrida Seminars Translation Project in France and for our catch-up conversations over coffee. At the Center for Public Humanities and Cultural Heritage, I thank Steve Lubar, Susan Smulyan, Marisa Angell Brown, and Sabina Griffin for creating a vibrant graduate certificate program that allowed me to rethink my research at a crucial stage. At the RISD Museum, I thank Sarah Ganz Blythe and especially Amy Pickworth, whose thoughtful conversations at the museum café gave me the necessary direction to think adventurously about my humanities degree.

While working with Brown's Digital Publications Initiative, I have been fortunate to get to know some of the hardworking folks at the Center for Digital Scholarship. First, I am humbled to thank Digital Scholarship Editor Allison Levy for going above and beyond in her role as a mentor. Offering her expertise, wit, and friendship, Allison made my final year and a half at Brown one of the most fun and productive (and not just because she helped me acquire a laser printer during a pandemic). I am also grateful to Crystal Brusch, Ben Tyler, Elli Mylonas, Patrick Rashleigh, Lindsay Elgin, Shashi Mishra, Ashley Champagne, Laura Foster, Nora Dimmock, and Joe Meisel. I am astounded by the incredible projects they create at the University Library, and I am fortunate to have been part of their community, even if only for a brief time.

I have been extremely fortunate to have the company of a collegial community of graduate students: Dorin Smith, Claire Gullander-Drolet, Anna Thomas, John Casey, Cole Morgan, Michael Gastiger, Nicole Fung, Danny Byrne, Eleanor Rowe, Noah Brooksher, and Erin Prior. I especially thank Jennie Snow for our friendship; beyond our weekly missives and

ongoing music exchanges, I could not have imagined another person with whom to have shared the comedy of the graduate experience.

Finally, I thank my mother, Susan Larson, and my sister, Casey Wasserman, who continue to love me despite my own ugliness. They are the readers, writers, thinkers, and wits whom I am proud to look up to. This project is for them and in the memory of my later father Julian Wasserman.

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INTRODUCTION

Gilding the American Scene

One's philosophy, one's logic might perhaps be muddled, but one clung to them for the convenience of their explanation of so much of the ugliness.

— *The American Scene*

In 1904, when Henry James returned to America for the first time in nearly two decades, the novelist remarked on an unusual halo enveloping his native land. “There was gold-dust in the air,” he recalls in *The American Scene* (1907), adding that his travels amounted to “a gorgeous golden blur” (10, 81). For the author of *The Golden Bowl* (1904), the effect of such a glow was to provide “the golden frame of an interesting picture,” allowing him to take in the American nation as his artistic subject (301). The “picture” that emerged was a literary portrait of America in the early-twentieth century, an imagined painting that lends the travelogue its title and that serves as its central conceit. Within this imagined painting, the golden air of America marked “the presence of an unreasoned appeal, in nature, to the sense of beauty,” its effect “cast[ing] an irresistible spell, bath[ing] the picture in the...charming sadness that resigned itself with a silent smile” (30, 15). Such beauty tempts viewers of the American Scene to “really to get into the picture, to cross, as it were, the threshold of the frame” (29).

That James repeatedly invokes gold to describe the beauty of the American Scene is fitting, and not just because he was writing in the twilight of the Gilded Age. Rather, as James's contemporary George Santayana explains in his 1896 treatise *The Sense of Beauty*, the beautiful

is best understood as a kind of *gilded* object. As if describing James's travels in America, the philosopher writes: "The treasures of...memory have been melted and dissolved[] and are now *gilding the object that supplants them*; they are giving the object expression."¹ Unlike Kant, who famously argued that beauty is disinterested, Santayana offers a kind of affective aesthetic formalism, articulating beauty as "value positive, intrinsic, and *objectified*"; as "pleasure *regarded* as the quality of a thing."² In other words, the beautiful reveals itself to be a largely self-affirming judgment, avowing one's desire for beauty in an object, person, or scene. Or, as critic Elaine Scarry has described in more recent inquiries, "[T]he moment of perceiving beauty also confers on the object the gift of life."³

Yet, within the span of two decades, the golden halo of James's native land and his evocative description of "what American beauty should be" had effectively dissipated, allowing the American Scene to be shown in a different, uglier light (25). As the cultural critic H. L. Mencken quipped in his 1927 essay "The Libido for the Ugly," America had then presented "a scene so dreadfully hideous, so intolerably bleak and forlorn that it reduced the whole aspiration of man to a macabre and depressing joke" (471–72).⁴ While such words specifically describe Pennsylvania steel country seen from the window of an express train, Mencken ultimately saw the "unbroken and agonizing ugliness, the sheer revolting monstrousness, of every house in sight" as a stand-in for American life more broadly (477–78). "It is as if some titanic and aberrant genius, uncompromisingly inimical to man, had devoted all the ingenuity of Hell to the making of them," he writes of the area's clapboard houses. "They show grotesqueries of ugliness

¹ Santayana 120, emphasis added.

² Santayana 31, emphasis added.

³ Scarry 69.

⁴ An earlier version of "The Libido for the Ugly" appeared in the January 23, 1927 issue of the *Chicago Sunday Tribune* as the "The Black Country."

that, in retrospect, become almost diabolical. One cannot imagine mere human beings concocting such dreadful things, and one can scarcely imagine human beings bearing life in them" (473–74). Was this the same America that James had visited at the turn of the century?

Although evocative of the literary naturalism of then-contemporary writers like Theodore Dreiser or Stephen Crane, Mencken's visceral response to the ugly scene in Pennsylvania reveals itself as less a critique of American industrialism than a broader defense of *aestheticism*, of the pursuit and preservation of beauty for its perceived social and intellectual value. For, what truly scandalizes the cultural critic is not simply industrial blight or its impact on the lives of those who work in the steel mills. Rather, as Mencken's earlier essay "The American: His Ideas of Beauty" (1913) suggests, the scene is the culmination of his belief that "the American is a foe to the beautiful"; that "[i]t is apparently impossible for him to think of beauty as a thing in itself."⁵ Just a few years later, in "The Libido for the Ugly," Mencken would borrow the popular Freudian language of his day to psychologize, jokingly, the aesthetic impulse that lends the essay its title. There, he writes:

Here is something that the psychologists have so far neglected: the love of ugliness for its own sake, the lust to make the world intolerable. Its habitat is the United States. Out of the melting pot emerges a race which hates beauty as it hates truth. The etiology of this madness deserves a great deal more study than it has got. There must be causes behind it; it arises and flourishes in obedience to biological laws, and not as a mere act of God. What, precisely, are the terms of those laws? And why do they run stronger in America than elsewhere? Let some honest *Privat Dozent* in pathological sociology apply himself to the problem. (475)⁶

⁵ Mencken, "The American" 98, 94.

⁶ It is worth noting Mencken's passing, racially tinged reference to the American melting pot, which traces its popular origin to Israel Zangwill's 1908 play, *The Melting Pot*. For more on xenophobia and racial anxiety at the time Mencken wrote, see Michaels's *Our America: Nativism, Modernism, and Pluralism* (1995).

The absurdity, the sickness that Mencken identifies in American life is the way that Americans appear to seek out “ugliness for its own sake” rather than cultivating a sense for beauty, as Santayana would describe in his treatise for the well-to-do. Condescension aside, Mencken’s rhetoric in articulating the American “libido for the ugly” betrays a telling critical uneasiness. For, even though the cultural critic jokingly passes “the problem” off to some psychoanalytically inclined critic-to-come, it is as if he is unable, or perhaps unwilling, to make sense of his own diagnosis. Instead, he laughs it off. Yet, in ultimately casting aside this problem of American Ugliness to academic posterity, Mencken appears to relinquish his authority as one of the most prominent cultural critics of his day and as one of the supreme defenders of beauty and taste. In this way, “The Libido of the Ugly” evades its central question, a question that this study pursues: What is ugliness, and what makes constitutes its appeal in early-twentieth-century America?

Ugly Americanism picks up where Mencken left off, exploring how authors and artists actively engaged the idea of ugliness in their work, suggesting that the ugly provided a crucial, self-critical aesthetic framework for their respective visions of the American Scene. Taking James’s cue, *Ugly Americanism* pays particular attention to “excrescences on the American surface,” what we might think of as the artistic texture highlighting a broader investment in the aestheticization of American life through various cultural forms.⁷ Examining literary, artistic, and popular works, this study not only reads the American cultural canon against the grain by focusing on via ugly subjects, strategies, and contexts, but it also examines works that call into the question the cultural politics of aesthetic judgment more broadly. In doing so, it contends that ugliness offers a peculiar instance of what Richard Chase, in his classic study *The American*

⁷ James, *The American Scene* 165.

Novel and Its Tradition (1957), describes as American literature's "broken circuit." Drawing on the 1907 preface to Henry James's novel *The American*, in which James describes "things that can reach us only through the *beautiful* circuit and subterfuge of our thought and desire," Chase articulates a failure of romance that gives way to experiences of alienation, contradiction, and disorder.⁸ Understanding the broader relevance of Chase's observations about genre—or what we might broadly think of as subconscious expectations of artistic form—to aesthetic judgment, *Ugly Americanism* tracks the affective short-circuiting that ugliness produces as it triangulates the aesthetic, physical, and social expectations placed on objects, bodies, and scenes of collective American life.

However, the question remains: why pursue ugliness when so much of American culture remains invested in the *national* character of beauty, from the alluring golden haze that James describes in *The American Scene* to Edna Ferber's 1931 novel *American Beauty*, which aptly lends its name a romantic cultural obsession with beauty, beautification, and all things beautiful? Although this project does not pursue the question of nationalism explicitly but instead takes the nation as a thematic subject pursued by the authors and artists it examines, one example of cultural nationalism provides an instructive case to consider the overly seductive lure of beauty. Once set to its now-iconic music, Katharine Lee Bates's poem "America the Beautiful" (1895/1910) became such a popular patriotic song that it was once a contender for the national anthem during the Depression.⁹ Although remembered for such lines as "America! America! / God shed His grace on thee / And crown thy good with brotherhood / From sea to shining sea," Bates's poem—as a kind of *aesthetic* national anthem—more subtly expresses anxiety about the ideal of American Beauty that made it so popular. For example, as the poem progresses, beauty

⁸ Chase 27, 2, emphasis added.

⁹ Collins 20.

becomes suggestively *vulnerable*, in need of divine projection and self-composure: “America! America! / *God mend thine every flaw, / Confirm thy soul in self-control, / Thy liberty in law!*” (lines 13–16, emphasis added). Bates’s imperative exclamation points throughout “America the Beautiful” betray uneasiness about the gilded veneer of American Beauty—about imperfections and their care, about remaining measured and poised, about protecting freedom from tyranny. The nationalist implications of “America the Beautiful” work to suggest that beauty’s vulnerability warrants universal recognition and supplication as well as proselytization and defense, but they also suggest beauty’s finitude. Fittingly, Benedict Anderson, author of the landmark *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (1983), once reflected the following in an interview: “I must be the only one writing about nationalism who doesn’t think it ugly....I actually think that nationalism can be an attractive ideology. I like its Utopian elements.”¹⁰ If nationalism thus presents an “attractive ideology,” then “America the Beautiful” demonstrates how the American Scene typically works to conjure away the threat of ugliness, which even in James’s travelogue, threatens to “ravage[],” “disfigure[]” and “spoil” the national picture (341).

As I show throughout this project, a more expansive understanding of the aesthetic in American life will allow us to recover a less-prominent artistic and authorial fascination with rendering what is, in fact, *not* beautiful about the American Scene: from its landscapes to the people who inhabit them. Yet as the scandalous tone of “The Libido for the Ugly” suggests, to value ugliness at all seemingly violates a broader aesthetic tradition in the West that has, since the ancient Greeks, denigrated the ugly in order to elevate the beautiful. In this sense, the aesthetic tradition carries with it a series of historical determinations that inform beauty and ugliness as aesthetic categories with social, cultural, and even political resonances. To clarify

¹⁰ Quoted in Özkirimli, p. 107. See also, Anderson’s *Imagined Communities*.

my use of the term “ugly” throughout this project, I will briefly outline a history that has sought to contain and dismiss that which does not conform to beauty, or at least what is perceived to be beautiful.

In Plato’s influential view, the sensuous world of man is a reflection of an intelligible world of pure Ideas: the closer to expressing the Idea, the more beautiful, good, and true, while ugliness is further away from ideality.¹¹ In Plato’s *Republic*, the figure of Socrates—famous for his ugly visage—confirms the seductive quality of Platonic Idealism when he asks (somewhat ironically) about blind men: “Do you want to see ugly things, blind and crooked, when it’s possible to hear bright and fair ones from others?”¹² The question is rhetorical; for, although blind men obviously cannot see, the philosopher suggests a kind of universal will-to-beauty, that even the blind might still desire an essential or conceptual beauty—a beauty of the Idea. In this regard, the beautiful is not *merely* visual; as we will see, beauty and ugliness can manifest in at least three ways: aesthetically (in art), physically (in embodied forms), and socially (in situations involving ethics). Here, however, beauty is a conceptual way of approaching the world that links the beautiful with truth and goodness.¹³ However, in contrast to such Idealism, Plato’s disciple Aristotle suggested that the ugly might better be viewed as the real rather than as the corruption of the ideal. In his *Poetics*, the philosopher describes *mimesis* as the artistic imitation

¹¹ This association of the beautiful with truth and goodness is demonstrative of Alain Badiou’s convincing claim that philosophy treats art “inaesthetically.” That is, when philosophy makes art an object of its analysis, it predetermines artistic concepts to fit with its own means and aims of analysis. See Badiou, pp. 1–15.

¹² Plato, *The Republic* Book VI.

¹³ For Plato, this ideological alliance between the beautiful, good, and true is strategic; for, the beautiful becomes the foundation of the imaginary society conjured in *The Republic*’s utopian philosophical project. However, it is worth noting that while Plato famously privileges the visual appreciation of beauty in the *Timaeus*, *The Republic* makes a more conceptual use of beauty, imbuing it with a moral and epistemological value (the beautiful as good and true) that maintains social order.

of reality. In this view, ugly or unpleasant subjects arousing pity or fear can be forgiven because their artistic representation induces an emotional response—*catharsis*—that forgives their inherent offensiveness because it serves an artistic purpose. Importantly, yet strangely enough, mimesis provides an influential framework in the history of art and aesthetics for the *beautification* of ugly subjects through artistic skill.

It is because of Plato and Aristotle's supreme cultural influence that the history of aesthetics has traditionally relegated ugliness to the margins—even if, as Umberto Eco and Gretchen E. Henderson have shown, the ugly and the beautiful have been culturally and historically relative terms.¹⁴ Even if ugliness has always existed, philosophical interest in the subject has always been marginal and/or marginalized compared with beauty. For example, when Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten coined the term “aesthetics” in the late-eighteenth century, he explicitly stated: “The purpose of aesthetics is the perfection of sensuous cognition as such, which is beauty. And the imperfection of the same, which is ugliness, is to be avoided.”¹⁵ In this tremendously consequential definition, aesthetics is concerned with establishing limits: it is first and foremost about the recognition of beauty while ugliness, an afterthought, is unequivocally dismissed. What is more, Kant's landmark *Critique of Judgment* (1790) reproduces this bias in its adventurous attempt to reconcile the sensuous with the intelligible, to bring aesthetic experience under the auspices of knowledge. This influential work of aesthetic theory yields only a handful of references to ugliness that repeat Aristotle's notion that the ugly can be

¹⁴ Eco, *On Ugliness*; Henderson, *Ugliness: A Cultural History*.

¹⁵ Baumgarten 160. Specifically, Baumgarten distinguishes the idea of aesthetics from the ancient Greek *aisthesis*, a broader designation of sensuous experience. In this way, what Baumgarten designates by “aesthetics” is a specific kind of sense-perception that explicitly values beauty. Contemporary thinkers like Rancière will go on to describe how such a distinction has its own politics in play, what Rancière influentially has called “the distribution of the sensible.” See Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*.

beautified through its artistic depiction.¹⁶ While beauty evolves into a complex system of aesthetic judgment for Kant—a system in which the beautiful is a subjective-universal that can even be exceeded by the enigmatic experience of the sublime—ugliness represents an unnerving kind of aesthetic and cultural refuse, one better left to the shadows or to lurk as a minor, unexceptional detail in the woodwork of serious philosophical thought. This makes sense, however, considering that the Kantian framework’s emphasis on pleasure in aesthetic experience leaves little room for the “bestiary of affects”—among them apprehension, revulsion, dread, disdain, fear, etc.—that ugliness is often thought to beget.¹⁷

Until the mid-nineteenth century, ugliness retained its ancient Greek treatment as either an unsightly natural phenomenon or as an artistic subject to be made beautiful—but rarely was it a subject of inquiry in its own right. This changed with the German philosopher Karl Rosenkranz, who outlined the formal characteristics of the ugly in *The Aesthetics of Ugliness* (1853), arguing that resistance to ugliness arises from the aesthetic expectations projected onto an object by a beholder. A follower of Hegel, whose *Lectures on Aesthetics* (1835) marks the more influential understanding of “aesthetics” as the philosophy of fine art, Rosenkranz argued that ugliness could be understood as the violated expectations of form. Such violations include

¹⁶ In the *Critique of Judgment* Kant devotes a single paragraph (§48 “The relation of genius to taste”) to the topic of ugliness:

Where fine art manifests its superiority is in the beautiful descriptions it gives of things that in nature would be ugly or displeasing. The Furies, diseases, devastations of war, and the like, can (as evils) be very beautifully described, and even represented in pictures. One kind of ugliness alone is incapable of being represented conformably to nature without destroying all aesthetic delight, and consequently artistic beauty, namely, that which excites *disgust*... (141, emphasis in original).

See Kant, *Critique of Judgment*. For an extended analysis of ugliness in Kant, see Guyer, “Kant on the Purity of the Ugly.”

¹⁷ Ngai 7. Following this oversight on Kant’s part, Sianne Ngai’s *Ugly Feelings* has forcefully cataloged the titular “ugly feelings,” or affects, that are typically undervalued by philosophical thought.

formlessness (a lack of form), incorrectness (erroneous form), and disfiguration (de-formation). Rosenkranz concluded that ugliness is the *negation* of beauty, that the ugly could only be understood via a *negative* relation to the beautiful. “It is not as if the beautiful, in order to be beautiful, owed something to the ugly,” he writes. “It is beautiful also in the absence of its foil, but ugliness is the danger that threatens it from inside itself, the contradiction that it poses to itself through its essence. With ugliness it is different. It is...only possible through its reflexive relationship to the beautiful, in relation to which it finds its measure. Beauty, like goodness, is thus an absolute, and ugliness, like evil, is only something relative.”¹⁸ The ugly, in this view, always identifies a lack—the failure of subconscious aesthetic expectation, the failure of anticipated beauty. However, Rosenkranz had great admiration for the artistic strategies of ugliness—particularly for its affinities with the comic—and his work offers a central definition of the ugly for this project: that is, rather than attributing a positive definition to ugliness, Rosenkranz insists that it be formally defined as the *not*-beautiful. (Only in the twentieth century will Theodor W. Adorno take Rosenkranz’s argument for the aesthetic importance of ugliness a step further, arguing, “If one originated in the other, it is beauty that originated in the ugly, and not the reverse.”¹⁹)

With this aesthetic tradition in mind, how might we interpret the pervasive American Ugliness that Mencken described? In the first place, the cultural moment in which Mencken wrote “The Libido for the Ugly” was characterized by an unprecedented interest in the transgressive and, at times, revelatory qualities of aesthetic ugliness. As Lesley Higgins has argued, modernism in the early-twentieth century “marks a particular, culminating moment in Western culture’s dismantling or fracturing of the Platonic triad” of beauty, truth, and

¹⁸ Rosenkranz 33.

¹⁹ Adorno 50.

goodness.²⁰ Following the ravages of the First World War, ugliness—from the traumatic facial injuries of soldiers in Europe to the industrial landscapes of capitalist production around the world—became an inescapable fact of everyday life.²¹ In response to the tremendous disruption of the global cultural, social, and political order, visual artists like Picasso and Matisse along with literary figures like Ezra Pound and Wyndham Lewis embraced new modes of expression that were increasingly derided by their critics as ugly. As the psychologist Carl Gustav Jung wrote of Picasso’s paintings, “It is the ugly, the sick, the grotesque, the incomprehensible, the banal that are sought out—not for the purpose of expressing anything, but only in order to conceal; an obscurity that spreads like a cold fog over desolate moors; the whole exercise quite pointless, like a spectacle that can do without a spectator.”²² Despite Jung’s protests that the avant-garde’s embrace of the hideous was purposeless, for artists like Pound, ugliness was an aesthetic response to the dismal material conditions of post-war life; for others, like Picasso, the ugly was not simply a lament for a lost world but, rather, the expression of a “pure plastic vision” that was emerging in the present one.²³

The chapters of this project explore the interrelated aesthetic, embodied, and social dimensions of ugliness in literary texts and artworks that follow the announcement of a modernist “cult of ugliness” by Pound in his 1913 essay “The Serious Artist.”²⁴ Refuting Mencken’s particular claim that Americans are anti-aesthetic or even anaesthetic, *Ugly Americanism* considers the artistic possibilities of ugliness understood not simply as a failure to be beautiful but as an aesthetic logic that, in the spirit of Rosenkranz, actively rejects beauty as

²⁰ Higgins 15.

²¹ See Taylor for a discussion of wartime facial injuries.

²² Quoted in Taylor, p. 51.

²³ Einstein 26. I discuss Picasso, Einstein, and the modernist vogue for primitivism in Chapter 2.

²⁴ Pound, “The Serious Artist.”

its ideal. We find one such example with the modernist writer Gertrude Stein, who seemingly reclaims the ugliness that Mencken relinquishes at the end of “The Libido for the Ugly.” While Mencken dismissed the ugly clapboard houses of Western Pennsylvania—where, coincidentally, Stein was born—the avant-garde writer sang their praises when she, like James, revisited America after decades spent abroad. In *Everybody’s Autobiography* (1937), Stein recalls the following detail of her 1934–35 return trip to her native land:

The wooden houses of America excited me as nothing else in America excited me...*Almost best I liked those near the railway stations old ones not very old once but still old ones with long flat wooden surfaces, painted sometimes not and many near automobile dumps.* I liked them all....there are so many of them an endless number of them and endless varieties in them. It is what in America is very different, each one has something and well taken care of or neglect helps them, helps them to be themselves each one of them. (182–83, emphasis added)

While, for Mencken, such houses represented “the love of ugliness for its own sake,” for Stein, who would spend much of her trip defending the ugliness of her writings, they offer an aesthetics of self-expression that rejects the arbitrary limitations imposed by one’s environment. The individual homes are diverse and evocative in their individuality as well as in their diversity, regardless of their essentially unharmonious, decrepit, and perhaps unlovable character. What Stein admires about the clapboard houses of America is how open the nation is to a range of aesthetic experiences for which beauty cannot—indeed refuses to—account. Although Stein admitted that she was surprised by how “beautiful” America was when she visited after three decades abroad, her own work reveals how the simplistic logic of beauty can sometimes make it an inappropriate stylistic treatment for her own vision of the American Scene.²⁵ Following writers and artists like Stein, who embraced the generative potential of ugliness, *Ugly*

²⁵ Morris Jr 8.

Americanism explores the place of the aesthetic in American life and the broader cultural politics of aesthetic judgment in American Scenes of the twentieth century.

Chapter 1 explores the aesthetic dimension of ugliness, describing how Stein cultivated an emphatically ugly style in her nearly thousand-page novel *The Making of Americans* (1925). More specifically, it tracks how the novel's unnamed narrator employs all of Rosenkranz's characteristics of aesthetic ugliness—formlessness, disfiguration, and incorrectness—in order to wrestle a distinct textual subjectivity from Stein, the actual author of the text. A case study in Stein's theory of ugliness as a relation of “double resistance,” the novel weaves an aesthetic circuit between reader, writer, and text only to “grate” against the relations it sets up. Beginning as a story about the Americanization of two families over several generations, *The Making of Americans* transforms into an unwieldy autobiography of the narrator, who, as the self-proclaimed writer of the text, turns to a gratuitously repetitive literary style to tell of her own love of repeating in others. As the narrator bursts through the novel's frame narrative and challenges Stein for authorship of the text, *The Making of Americans* effectively leaves behind its readers, and even its author, as it foregrounds its own aesthetic concerns.

From aesthetic ugliness to embodied ugliness, Chapter 2 examines the use of subversive racial caricature in two Harlem Renaissance novels: Carl Van Vechten's controversial bestseller *Nigger Heaven* (1926) and Rudolph Fisher's innovative detective novel *The Conjure-Man Dies* (1932). While the venerable W. E. B. Du Bois famously charged that all black art must necessarily be beautiful to combat systemic anti-black racism, Van Vechten and Fisher drew on caricature from opposite sides of the color line to critique the black body as a site of overwhelming cultural meaning. In particular, I argue that their use of caricature's ugly strategy of “overloading”—exaggerating individual features to the point of grotesque distortion—allowed both authors to show how aesthetic biases could otherwise reproduce broader social

biases. Van Vechten's intellectual protagonists become so racially self-aware that they reproduce the very stereotypes of blackness they try to dispel through their creative work whereas the characters in Fisher's novel become so suspicious of superficial marks of otherness—physical features and African origins—that they almost allow an attempted murder to go unsolved. As I argue, such caricatures of black progress and primitivism populating Harlem's underworld share the same progressive politics as Du Bois yet nevertheless draw on ugliness as a vital artistic resource.

Turning to the social dimension of ugliness, Chapter 3 explores the broader role of cultural stylization in imagining social relations in Nathanael West's *The Day of the Locust* (1939). Drawing on the photography of West's contemporary William Mortensen, the chapter articulates a "grotesque camp" sensibility that blurs the line between violence and comedy, the hideous and the glamorous, as well as life and art. Alongside West's artist-characters—Tod Hackett as well as Faye and Harry Greener—Mortensen's photographs reveal how the Hollywood culture industry was motivated by a "command to look." As West's novel suggests, the effect of manipulating the public gaze in an age of mass culture was to deflect from the violent incoherence of the world it was supposed to depict through the camera's eye.

Finally, the project concludes with a brief coda that considers the question of ugliness and politics, examining William Lederer and Eugene Burdick's influential 1958 political novel *The Ugly American*. Exploring the superficial aesthetic effects of ideology in the fictional Southeast Asian country of Sarkhan, *The Ugly American* reveals the failures of projecting the American Scene onto lands and people abroad, yet it was nevertheless responsible for affecting major changes in America's foreign policy.

Before turning directly to the chapters, it is important to acknowledge that this project builds upon an enduring trend in literary criticism that asks questions about the relationship of

the aesthetic to literature.²⁶ However, it does not intervene in continuing debates about reading literary texts as aesthetic surfaces or as symptoms of broader ideological structures. While Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus have urged critics to “relinquish[] the freedom dream that accompanies the work of demystification,” attending to the ugly as either surface or symptom is already complicated by a conflicting history in the West of treating ugliness as a superficial and/or essential quality of a particular object.²⁷ Instead, *Ugly Americanism* is committed to articulating the cultural relevance of ugliness more generally by examining overlooked visions of the American Scene that have been largely misunderstood because of their perceived ugly subjects, strategies, or contexts. This work is made possible by a wide range of critical attention in literary studies to the topic of the aesthetic and by a handful of works that address ugliness.²⁸ However, like the field of aesthetic theory, literary studies has not been immune to overlooking the importance of the ugly. Even in works that might appear to address ugliness directly, studies like Wendy Steiner’s *Venus in Exile: The Rejection of Beauty in 20th-Century Art* (2001) and Sianne Ngai’s *Ugly Feelings* (2005), ugliness remains critically and conceptually undeveloped.²⁹ In Steiner’s case, ugliness is almost never discussed outright, and for Ngai’s more theoretically focused and politically-minded work, the art-historical context of ugliness is never fleshed out.

Thus, while critical attention has not overlooked ugliness per se, scholarly discourse has usually had the effect of re-subordinating the ugly to the beautiful rather than questioning their hierarchical relation in the first place. In this sense, most literary scholarship on the aesthetic,

²⁶ See, for example, Weinstein and Looby’s edited collection of essays *American Literature’s Aesthetic Dimensions* (2012) and Castronovo’s *Beautiful Democracy: Aesthetics and Anarchy in a Global Era* (2007).

²⁷ Best and Marcus 17.

²⁸ Two useful critical treatments of ugliness in literary studies include Higgins’s *The Modernist Cult of Ugliness: Aesthetics and Gender Politics* (2002) and Barker’s *Plain Ugly: The Unattractive Body in Early Modern Culture* (2010).

²⁹ Steiner, *Venus in Exile*; Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*.

especially socially motivated criticism, rehearses what Elaine Scarry calls “the problem of lateral disregard.”³⁰ As Scarry describes in *On Beauty and Being Just* (1999), the presence of beauty causes unavoidable comparisons with the less-beautiful or the ugly. While, for Scarry, this intuitive discrimination creates the very possibility of justice, it fails to consider the way that beauty can crucially perpetuate alienation and exclusion. If the aesthetic is for Scarry and Steiner the ground for ethical sociality, then they overlook the persecutory role of beauty in such real-life contexts as Susan M. Schweik has forcefully described in *The Ugly Laws: Disability in Public* (2009).³¹

In contrast to literary studies, recent work in art history and in feminist studies has made more progress considering the generative potential of ugliness as an aesthetic category. For example, Andrei Pop and Mechtild Widrich’s translation of Karl Rosenkranz’s *The Aesthetics of Ugliness* and their edited collection of essays *Ugliness: The Non-Beautiful in Art and Theory* (2014) offer some of the most expansive resources to consider ugliness beyond the critical and philosophical shadow of beauty. As Pop and Widrich write, “The theoretical position of ugliness today thus remains ambiguous...the ugly is neither nature nor culture, neither purely in the mind nor in the world, neither a solid fact nor mere ungrounded judgement. Its position between idea and reality seems to constitute its interest.”³² Likewise, Sara Rodrigues and Ela Przybylo’s *On the Politics of Ugliness* (2018) offers a multi-disciplinary, intersectional feminist account of ugliness as an embodied experience that goes well beyond aesthetic concerns to create a cultural and political regime of “visual injustice.” Such recent work, which intersects with growing

³⁰ Scarry 81.

³¹ Disability studies and fat studies have been especially fruitful disciplines to take up the question of ugliness, usually to reject its embodied context on the grounds that ugliness is a social and cultural construct.

³² Pop and Widrich 9.

scholarship in the fields of queer and fat studies, treats ugliness as a productive critical topic by interrogating the social consequences of aesthetic judgments.

To conclude, this is not a project compelled to find beauty in ugliness or vice versa. Rather, *Ugly Americanism* sees ugliness as part of an aesthetic stylistic strategy that challenges idealized subjectivities, bodies, and social relations; instead of choosing works and cultural figures that are simply presumed to *be* ugly, it highlights those that *render* the ugliness of a particular artistic vision. As will become clear, ugliness is a surprisingly capacious category that provided artistic inspiration for startling visions of the American Scene in the early-twentieth century. If, in James's view, the American Scene might be thought of as a painting, then Stein will now serve as a useful starting point for considering how the nation might transform if given a different framing than American Beauty. When Stein first visited the galleries of the Louvre in Paris, she only saw the golden frames that surrounded the paintings; but as she recalls in her memoir of returning to America: "I am always hoping to have it happen [for] the picture to be alive inside in it[self], in that sense not to live in its frame, pictures have been imprisoned in frames, quite naturally and now...it is quite natural that pictures are trying to escape from the prison the prison of framing."³³ *Ugly Americanism* follows writers and artists who were not afraid to chase the American Scene once it made such an escape. Although the ugly is rarely thought to offer freedom in any proper sense, as Stein's quote might suggest, examining ugliness will allow us to cut through the golden haze that James saw when he returned to his native land and to see it as something even more compelling.

³³ G. Stein, *Everybody's Autobiography* 312.

CHAPTER 1

Gertrude Stein, *The Making of Americans*, and the Displeasure of the Text

For a very long time everybody refuses and then almost without a pause almost everybody accepts. In the history of the refused in the arts and literature the rapidity of the change is always startling. Now the only difficulty with the *volte-face* concerning the arts is this. When the acceptance comes, by that acceptance the thing created becomes a classic....The characteristic quality of a classic is that it is beautiful.

—“Composition as Explanation”

I. Gertrude Stein Gets Ugly

In acknowledging the importance of beauty in her 1926 lecture “Composition as Explanation,” Gertrude Stein was well aware that her writings would likely never rank among the classics of literary history.³⁴ Insinuating herself into “the history of the refused in the arts and literature,” Stein was already known for her immensely polarizing writings. Her 1914 poetry collection *Tender Buttons*, for example, was billed by the publisher as “something like terror,” a sentiment easily confirmed by reviews at the time of publication.³⁵ Faced with *Tender Button’s* enigmatic descriptions of objects, food, and rooms, reviewers ridiculed Stein’s writing as “Wort-salad” and “a farrago of nonsense, a meaningless medley of ill-assorted words.”³⁶ One reviewer even suggested that readers might prefer toppling a skyscraper onto themselves than risk a foray into Stein’s language. Although Stein has now been accepted into the academic

³⁴ Unlike the majority of the American lectures I cite, “Composition as Explanation” was delivered in the U.K.

³⁵ Quote from “Appendix B” in G. Stein, *Tender Buttons* 85–86.

³⁶ Reviews collected in Curnutt, pp. 14–17.

literary canon, such reviews indicate why the author could hardly ever expect to find a broader audience for her work. Her unconventional style raises the questions of what readers perceive as pleasurable and, implicitly, of how relativist perceptions of beauty inflect literature as a changing cultural formation.

As I argue throughout this chapter, Stein's place among "the refused" in literature is due to the emphatically ugly style she cultivated, a style that courts readerly displeasure. Heeding Stein's sentiment that "[e]very masterpiece came into the world with a measure of ugliness in it...*It's our business as critics to stand in front of it and recover its ugliness*," I draw on her unusual definition of ugliness as a relation of "double resistance" to analyze her peculiar vision of the American Scene depicted in *The Making of Americans*.³⁷ In my twofold reading, I first track the convergent themes of Americanism and aestheticism in the novel's frame narrative and then turn to Karl Rosenkranz's formal characteristics of the ugly—taken from *The Aesthetics of Ugliness* (1853)—to describe the interrelated formlessness, disfiguration, and incorrectness by which Stein's narrator emerges as the central character of the text. Why, I ask, does Stein abandon beauty—by her own admission, the characteristic quality of a literary classic—and instead turn to ugly aesthetic strategies in her self-professed magnum opus, a monumental and extremely unconventional depiction of the American Scene? Focusing on *The Making of Americans*'s thematic obsession with the aesthetic and then tracking its formal uglification will allow us to resist dominant trends in Stein criticism, which are to find beauty in Stein's language and to read the author's biography into her work. As we will see, the narrator's dramatic self-fashioning becomes a powerful meditation on narrative self-definition and aesthetic judgment,

³⁷ G. Stein, *Four in America* vii, emphasis added.

one that bucks against a broader modernist fascination with ugliness that will be described shortly.

Although Stein's friendship with modernist painters such as Matisse and Picasso led to a much earlier curiosity with ugliness, she explicitly discusses the ugly in relation to her work in her 1935 lecture "How Writing Is Written."³⁸ She introduces the subject by emphasizing the generational nature of how art is received and refused, a trope that remains central to the multigenerational narrative of *The Making of Americans*. Stein states:

When one is beginning to write he is always under the shadow of the thing that is just past. And that is the reason why the creative person always has the appearance of ugliness. There is this persistent drag of the habits that belong to you. And in struggling away from this thing there is always an ugliness. That is the other reason why the contemporary writer is always refused. It is the effort of escaping from the thing which is a drag upon you that is so strong that the result is an apparent ugliness: *and the world always says of the new writer, "It is so ugly!" And they are right, because it is ugly. If you disagree with your parents, there is an ugliness in the relation. There is a double resistance that makes the essence of this thing ugly.*³⁹

In contrast to strictly aesthetic terms, Stein suggests that ugliness is *relational*—in this case, a tension between the "drag" of social forces on the writer and the newness of the artwork they produce. Interestingly, she describes how the "apparent ugliness" of new writing becomes a part of its "essence" when a writer insists on its value despite the resistance he experiences from others. Her example of a disagreement between a parent and child emphasizes the *active* nature of this awkward relation. If a child persists in disobeying their parents—ever the symbol of authority—then they are effectively resisting resistance, what Stein describes as a relation of "double resistance." Perhaps a simpler way of describing this ugly relation is to say that, for

³⁸ For useful background on this lecture, see "Contexts II" in G. Stein, *Ida*, pp. 259–61. It is worth noting that much of Stein's language in "How Writing Is Written" mirrors her discussion of Picasso's well-known embrace of ugliness, which Stein describes in her 1938 volume devoted to the artist. See *Picasso*, esp. p. 9.

³⁹ G. Stein, *Ida* 266–67, emphasis added.

Stein, “double resistance” is a kind of *aesthetic insistence*, one in which an ugly work of art demands consideration on its own terms, even if this might come at the cost of estranging the reader or viewer.

After describing ugliness as a relation of double resistance, Stein goes on in “How Writing Is Written” to pan the critical resistance to her earlier writings, explaining how aesthetic judgment about her work always superseded its appreciation as a work of art. She states:

You always have in your writing the resistance outside of you and inside of you, a shadow upon you, and the thing you must express. In the beginning of your writing, this struggle is so tremendous that the result is ugly; and that is the reason why the followers are always accepted before the person who made the revolution. The person who has made the fight probably makes it seem ugly, although the struggle has the much greater beauty. But the followers die out; and the man who made the struggle and the quality of beauty remains in the intensity of the fight. Eventually it comes out all right, and so you have this very queer situation which always happens with the followers: the original person has to have in him a certain element of ugliness. *You know that is what happens over and over again: the statement made that it is ugly—the statement made against me for the last twenty years. And they are quite right, because it is ugly. But the essence of that ugliness is the thing which will always make it beautiful. I myself think it is much more interesting when it seems ugly, because in it you see the element of the fight.*⁴⁰

Stein’s emphasis on the relativism of aesthetic judgment is initially surprising, especially after embracing the claim that her own work is, in fact, ugly. In stating that “the essence of that ugliness is the thing which will always make it beautiful,” Stein appears to equate the logic of aesthetic judgment with taste, which can always redeem what was previously refused with a *volte-face* in judgment. Beyond Stein’s well-known desire to become a literary celebrity, she fittingly describes artistic production in terms that mirror her discussion, just moments earlier, of ugliness as a relation of double resistance. On the one hand, there is the *internal* struggle of a writer trying to give form to “the thing [he] must express,” and, on the other, there is the *external* struggle to have his work be acknowledged by society, which cannot accept something radically

⁴⁰ G. Stein, *Ida* 267, emphasis added.

different from the norm. In either case, the writer must insist on the value and authenticity of his craft despite self-doubt and a canon that actively devalues his work. Sometimes the canon relents, as it eventually did with Stein. But to the heirs of the writer, to his followers, the struggle has already played out. To them, “the sediment of ugliness has settled down,” yielding “the solemnity of its beauty.”⁴¹ As a result, followers (and to this we might add readers) romanticize the original writer’s ugliness rather than directly grappling with the struggle that such ugliness represented; in other words, they reproduce their own romanticism, and accordingly, their work conveys beauty. (This is precisely why, as Stein’s college professor George Santayana argues in *The Sense of Beauty*, “aesthetics is concerned with the perception of values” as opposed to form itself.⁴²) However, to the writer who experienced “the vitality of the struggle” firsthand, ugliness is an essential part of “the fight” to express himself; it is simply the consequence of his own aesthetic insistence on the value of his work. Thus, Stein ends up defending the ugliness of her own work because she insists that it was written for the sake of its own artistry, not simply to pursue beauty.

Stein’s distinctive, relational take on ugliness must be distinguished from a broader modernist fascination with the ugly, in particular, from the so-called modernist “cult of ugliness” that traces its name to Ezra Pound’s 1913 essay “The Serious Artist.” Pound’s essay, much like Stein’s lecture, was a defense of modern poetics, arguing that unconventional artworks should be judged with respect to an artist’s devotion to their craft. However, Pound invoked the ugly to make an implicit aesthetic imperative about the beautiful. “As there are in medicine the art of diagnosis and the art of cure,” he wrote, “so in the arts, so in the particular arts of poetry and of literature, there is the art of diagnosis and there is the art of cure. They call one the cult of

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Santayana 12.

ugliness and the other the cult of beauty.”⁴³ Since diagnosis and cure work together, the beautiful and the ugly were “not in mutual opposition,” but as such language makes clear, ugliness was, in fact, something meant to be overcome rather than something to be pursued for its own sake.⁴⁴

Stein distinguishes herself from Pound’s cult of ugliness in two significant ways. First, and perhaps more superficially, she would have been disqualified by her gender and sexuality.⁴⁵ As Lesley Higgins has convincingly demonstrated, the modernist cult of ugliness ultimately served a specific homosocial function: it generally took the form of exclusionary artistic circles of men who, in addition to dedicating themselves to creating “modern” art, espoused racist, misogynist, and homophobic worldviews in the service of their own emancipation. However, the second and more pertinent way Stein distinguishes herself from the modernist the cult of ugliness is precisely how she treats the ugly as an end in and of itself. As Higgins observes, “The beautiful was still functional as a superlative expression of value, but always employed in radical juxtaposition to the ugliness believed to be inherent in the material conditions of the world, the artist, or the artifact (plastic or verbal).”⁴⁶ Although Pound and his circle—which included figures like Wyndham Lewis and T. S. Eliot—championed modern poetry under the banner of ugliness, they offered less a radical artistic program than a self-affirming critique of aesthetic judgment; their attempts to champion ugliness were more of a crusade to renovate contemporary definitions of the beautiful while reaffirming existing hegemonies. By contrast, Stein was a queer woman who pursued ugliness for its own sake, even if she understood the

⁴³ Pound 45.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Numerous critics have pointed to the significance of Stein’s autobiography to understanding her writings. While I appreciate the intense autobiographical dimension of Stein’s writings, I share the cautious sentiment of Boyd and Kirsch, editors of *Primary Stein: Returning to the Writing of Gertrude Stein*, that an autobiographical focus, here, runs the risk of obscuring the potency of Stein’s work at the textual level.

⁴⁶ Higgins 151–52.

broad societal appeal of beauty. While in the Introduction to this project I describe how the ugly has been traditionally treated as a *lack* of beauty, Stein's writings suggest that ugliness may be more thoughtfully conceived as an active *negation* of the beautiful. As I argue in the second part of my reading of *The Making of Americans*, the novel's combination of formlessness, disfiguration, and incorrectness dramatically exceeds the Poundian notion that ugliness is a mere stepping stone to beauty. Instead, Stein will seemingly revel in the aesthetic possibilities engendered by ugliness, one of which will be that her narrator in *The Making of Americans* will burst through the novel's frame narrative to tell her own story about writing a text she is anxious to have read and judged by others.

Before finally turning to *The Making of Americans* and teasing out the consequences of its ugly narrative of Americanization, I must take a final detour that will explicate the aesthetic implications of "double resistance" as I invoke the phrase throughout the chapter. Although Stein had intellectual differences with her older brother Leo, a revealing anecdote from the latter's *Appreciation: Painting, Poetry & Prose* (1947) nicely illustrates the intersubjective challenge that ugliness poses, and it provides a useful paradigm to consider the relationality of works of art to their creators and their audiences. As Leo recalls:

Matisse once used a pretty girl as a model for a statuette which turned out to be something queer—a long cylindrical torso, a large-featured, distorted face, long bunch legs. The girl looked at the finished product and said, "How awfully ugly."

"Yes," said Matisse. "Isn't it?"

The girl looked a while longer. "Of course it's ugly, it's awfully ugly, and yet—and yet, there's something about it—something that isn't exactly ugly."

Matisse was, of course, interested, and tried to get more.

"Well, of course it's ugly, but yet there's something about it—something different, something—oh—oh I don't know what I mean," she ended, half in tears with the irritation.⁴⁷

⁴⁷ L. Stein 131–32.

In the aesthetic circuit between artist, artwork, and viewer, something has gone wrong.⁴⁸ Matisse's "queer" statuette dramatically conflicts with the pretty model's self-image; she fails to recognize herself in the object, and she deems the resulting short-circuit of aesthetic expectation "awfully ugly." But where exactly is ugliness located in this circuit? There is, of course, the statuette, which violates the Aristotelian principle of *mimesis*; it does not resemble the pretty model, and it further perverts the notion of rendering an ugly subject beautiful by *uglifying* it. However, Matisse and the model also elicit two noteworthy responses. On the one hand, the model's visceral reaction indicates discomfort with judgment itself: she calls the statuette "awfully ugly," but in ruminating about the warped object before her, she also reflects that there is more to it, that the artwork "isn't *exactly* ugly" (emphasis added). On the other hand, the model's irritation, hesitation, and inability to express herself is of significant interest to the artist. Matisse gladly confirms that his work of art *is* ugly—"Yes...Isn't it?"—and he urges the model to explain her response. Though the model, like Leo's reader, expects the artwork to reflect her prettiness, ugliness arises from the statuette being emphatically *not*-beautiful. Furthermore, its ugliness is both intrinsic *and* extrinsic, residing in the relational dynamic that the aesthetic short-circuit has made legible; it emerges through the taut and seemingly unyielding interrelation between the artwork (form), the artist (creator), and the viewer (beholder).

Although Leo Stein would famously dismiss his sister and her writings as "stupid," his anecdote nicely outlines the otherwise invisible field of relations that works of art can activate, doing so no less with Matisse, an artist among whom Gertrude Stein ranked herself, along with

⁴⁸ Coincidentally, E. L. McCallum also uses the phrase "aesthetic circuit" in her reading of *The Making of Americans* but in the very pointed sense of "an aestheticization of the hermeneutic circle" (*Unmaking* 39). Despite our differences on many theoretical points, some of which I examine in this chapter's discussion of emotion, McCallum offers one of the few thorough—and unparalleled—readings of the novel that I have come across. See McCallum, *Unmaking The Making of Americans*.

Picasso, as one of the three great “geniuses” of twentieth-century art.⁴⁹ While it is revealing that ugliness features prominently in Matisse’s artistic vision, the role played by the artist in the aesthetic circuit appears to be more overbearing than in the relation of double resistance that Stein describes in “How Writing Is Written.” Bracketing the obvious gender dynamic between Matisse and the model, there is, on the one hand, a sense that an artist has the final word about their artwork. But, on the other hand, to yield this power to the artist would be to overlook the tremendous emotional response of the model in this particular example. (I will address the limits of emotional considerations of ugliness in the second half of this chapter.) Resisting favoring either a top-down or bottom-up perspective, I am inspired by the in-betweenness of the ugly object, which is at the crux of the aesthetic circuit but would be denied agency because of its presumed inertness. While ugliness, as Stein has described, certainly works within cultural hierarchies of what is accepted and refused, I contend that double resistance offers a more lateral model of relations that maintains a dynamic positionality between subjects, objects, and their others. For, as we will now see in *The Making of Americans*, what is powerful about the ugly relation of double resistance is precisely how an artwork that might appear to be mute can nevertheless hold its own as it demands recognition on its own terms.

II. Reading *The Making of Americans*

Beginnings: Americanizing the Text

In 1934, Stein returned to the United States for the first time in over three decades. Born in 1874 in Allegheny, Pennsylvania, Stein moved to Paris in 1903 to live with brother Leo, who would later be ousted when Stein met partner Alice B. Toklas. In Paris, Stein spent many years

⁴⁹ Stein cemented her affiliation with the two giants of art in *Matisse Picasso and Gertrude Stein*, also known as *G.M.P.*

writing in obscurity, taking her native land as both her subject and her muse, and on the matter of her composite nationalism she once quipped, “America is my country and Paris is my hometown.”⁵⁰ Stein’s return to America was a triumphant one, marking her shift from a relatively unknown *avant-gardienne* to a household name. Having written the bestselling *Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* in the previous year, she set out with Toklas on a cross-country lecture tour that consisted of 74 speaking engagements in 37 cities, spanning 23 states.⁵¹ With the success of *The Autobiography*, a work that was as gossipy as it was stylistically lucid compared with works like *Tender Buttons*, Stein became an overnight celebrity.⁵² She graced the cover of *Time* magazine and was even welcomed by flashing lights in Times Square that declared: “Gertrude Stein has arrived in New York.” While she certainly relished the attention, Stein also came with a strong sense of purpose: to recast her earlier work, which had long been either neglected or dismissed.

Throughout her lectures, Stein repeatedly invokes her gargantuan 925-page novel, *The Making of Americans, Being a History of a Family’s Progress* (1925), as a touchstone for her ideas about art and modern life. Stein quotes or makes references to the novel in nearly every lecture, and it remains a model for her ideas, including the primary lecture I have been drawing upon, “How Writing Is Written.”⁵³ Composed between 1902 and 1911 but not published in its entirety until 1925, *The Making of Americans* recounts the unfolding multigenerational history of two American families, the Dehnings and the Herslands, doing so through a notoriously

⁵⁰ G. Stein, “An American and France” 63.

⁵¹ For more on Stein’s return trip to America, see Gambino’s detailed magazine article as well as Morris Jr’s more recent book-length study.

⁵² For an extended analysis of Stein’s rise to fame in an age of mass-media, see Leick.

⁵³ Stein repeatedly references the novel in “How Writing Is Written” and even quotes a lengthy passage from the severely abridged edition of the novel *The Making of Americans: The Hersland Family* (1934).

idiosyncratic style. Consisting of a limited vocabulary, the alternation of direct and digressive syntax, and the emphatic repetition of metaphysical ideas through long, undulating paragraphs, the novel spans nearly a thousand pages and was considered un-publishable until the American writer Robert McAlmon agreed to a limited printing through his Dijon publishing company Contact Editions.⁵⁴ What proves particularly difficult for readers of *The Making of Americans* is how the novel begins as an account of the Dehning and Hersland families and then gives way to the narrator's more abstract venture of completing a "history of every one, the fundamental character of every one, the bottom nature in them, the mixtures in them, the flavor of them, the meaning in them, the being in them" (290). Unlike the extreme compression of works like *Tender Buttons*, *The Making of Americans* is an expansive text, one that subordinates its apparent plot to abstract descriptions as it demonstrates an increasing awareness of its artistic creation and critical reception. Perhaps for this reason, the impulse of scholars has been to treat Stein as either a radical modernist or as an unconventional Americanist, divorcing the novel's style from its substance and vice versa. By contrast, my own reading views Stein's Americanism as converging with her aestheticism but with ugliness as its central object. Before turning to the formal qualities of the novel as a whole, I will first show how the multigenerational frame narrative of *The Making of Americans* not only defines Americanization in aesthetic terms—i.e., through an ugly relation of double resistance—but also how the novel portrays a broader American Scene characterized by the superficiality of appearances. This extended focus on the frame narrative will set up an important configuration for the eventual disruption of the

⁵⁴ Before *The Making of Americans* was published in its entirety, Ernest Hemingway played a key role in getting selections of the novel serialized in Ford Maddox Ford's *Transatlantic Review*. Stein recounts the experience in chapter seven of *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*.

aesthetic circuit between author, reader, and text that I discuss in the second half of my reading, which examines the narrator.

The Making of Americans opens by neatly rehearsing the double resistance that Stein invoked in “How Writing Is Written,” doing so in a scene reworked from Aristotle via Montaigne.⁵⁵ While Stein noted in her lecture, “If you disagree with your parents, there is an ugliness in the relation[;] There is a double resistance that makes the essence of this thing ugly,” the first paragraph of *The Making of Americans* turns that logic into a somewhat perverse parable with an ambiguous moral. It reads: “Once an angry man dragged his father along the ground through his own orchard. ‘Stop!’ cried the groaning old man at last, ‘Stop! I did not drag my father beyond this tree’ ” (3).⁵⁶ In contrast to Aristotle, who originally described how social behavior becomes internalized through repetition and ritual, Stein presents an ugly scene that exceeds convention in an unusual way. At the core of the tale’s transgression is a disagreement between parent and child. The child—in this case, an angry man—resists his father by violently dragging him across the family orchard. The old man acknowledges that he once dragged his own father across the same orchard, suggesting that violence is acceptable, even ritualized as part of a patriarchal status quo. However, the angry man, by dragging his father *past* the orchard tree—by continuing *after* the father has cried “Stop!”—appears to exceed any violent precedent. On the one hand, the old man suggests that his son justly resorts to violence, but on the other,

⁵⁵ As Steven Meyer briefly notes in the introduction to the Dalkey Archive Press edition of *The Making of Americans*, Stein acknowledged that the inspiration for this opening was a college theme using Montaigne’s *Essays*. Montaigne, in turn, draws on Book 7, Chapter 6 of Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*.

⁵⁶ The somewhat obtuse opening of the novel has functioned for critics as a cipher to understand the more abstract pages that follow. It is worth noting that the various descriptors for this opening—as “prologue” (Bridgman), “epigraph” (Doane), “prelude” (Ruddick), “genesis” (Wald), and even as “emotional anecdote” (McCallum)—suggest a formal ambiguity to Stein’s text. This ambiguity has made Stein ripe for readings that range from the autobiographical and cultural to the metaphysical and theoretical.

he also suggests his son's transgression by pointing out the location of the orchard tree. Still, the episode's sudden and unexplained presentism—the *in medias res* of a son dragging his father across an orchard without context and therefore without an ethical frame—simply appears to condone violence by depicting violent excess, making this, then, a parable without a clear moral. As will become clear when the novel introduces its characters, it is through similar scenes of tension that the inherent relationality of ugliness becomes a means of establishing character, in particular of asserting and establishing new identities in the face of old ones.

Subsequent paragraphs situate the violent double resistance of the opening within the explicit context of immigration to the New World. This theme is introduced in the novel's third and fourth paragraphs, which also announce the presence of the novel's narrator. After telling readers about the difficulty of "living down the tempers we are born with," the narrator states:

It has always seemed to me a rare privilege, this, of being an American, a real American, one whose tradition it has taken scarcely sixty years to create. We need only realise our parents, remember our grandparents and know ourselves and our history is complete.

The old people in a new world, the new people made out of the old, that is the story that I mean to tell, for that is what really is and what I really know. (3)

These brief paragraphs work to suggest that the violence of the orchard scene is symbolic of a broader multigenerational scheme of Americanization. Indeed, Priscilla Wald reads the novel alongside the Stein family's immigration to America and describes a larger cultural frame that saw the nation grappling with anxieties about personhood, family, and citizenship as they relate to American national identity. As Wald argues, the opening of the novel reflects the broader struggle of the immigrant experience and of families establishing roots in a new land: members of different generations often grappled with each other—and with various socialization initiatives—regarding the limits of assimilation and cultural belonging. In this sense, the angry

man dragging his father past the orchard tree is the violent manifestation of generational anxiety about the terms and costs of Americanization.

Returning to the paragraphs above, one can see how the “We” of “We need only realise our parents...” works to interpellate three potential subjects of its Americanism, laying the groundwork for an aesthetic circuit that the novel will eventually disrupt. First and most obvious, this “We” implicates *the narrator* in the narrative she is about to tell, something she confirms by identifying as one of “*us* the generation of grandchildren” (6, emphasis added). Hence, if Americanization might be thought of as an ongoing drama of double resistance between generations, the narrator’s use of the first-person extends that drama directly to herself.⁵⁷ As Wald usefully observes, “Immigrant narrators who depict themselves as Americans, who spell out their changes of being—or conversions—into Americans, assure an anxious native-born population that they intend not to disrupt but to assume an American identity.”⁵⁸ Relatedly, the “We” also implicates *the reader* as a potential sharer of the history the narrator is about to tell, implying that he or she is presumably one of the two types of Americans that the narrator mentions: either an American citizen by birth and by family (what she calls “an American”) or an Americanized grandchild of immigrants, like herself (what she calls “a real American”). Finally, and perhaps most well-known, the “We” implicates *Stein* as the author and teller of her own biographical history. As we will see, the ambiguity of this “We” becomes

⁵⁷ Although there are no explicit references to the narrator’s gender, McCallum makes the following statement, which I am inclined to accept: “There is no direct claim to gender by either the narrator or others in the novel referring to the narrator. We have at best only indirect indications of gender and, at worst, our rash assumptions. What male persona would ever plausibly express the kind of diminutive sentiment about a little writing on scraps of paper or urge the patience and love that this narrator expresses early in the novel? The very emotionality of the narrator marks the narrator as feminine in twentieth-century Western and particularly American culture” (“A Spare American Emotion” 164).

⁵⁸ Wald 243.

reflective of the novel's ongoing fascination with the ambiguous terms of American identity and identification as well as with the creative possibilities of both; for such reasons, I will argue for distinguishing the narrator as a textual subjectivity distinct from Stein.

The double resistance of the novel's opening becomes the trope through which *The Making of Americans* establishes its rather conventional Americanization narrative in its first half. As Wald convincingly observes, for Americanization, family becomes "the metaphor and site of socialization to bring psychological and cultural narratives together."⁵⁹ The novel's Americanization narrative centers on how the American-born children of Henry and Jenny Dehning, Jewish immigrants from Germany, struggle to build a life in the New World. After Henry leaves Europe and successfully pioneers a well-to-do life in the city of Bridgepoint (a fictionalized Baltimore, Maryland), he often teases his children Julia, George, and Hortense that they will not amount to anything. The younger generation resists their father's taunts, setting up another intergenerational struggle similar to the novel's opening: "The children laughed, 'You see you can't tell yet sir,' *they* answered, 'it will be different but *I* guess *we* will be good for something' " (9, emphasis added). Although the children speak with the third-person plural pronoun "they," what they actually say uses the first-person ("I" and "we"), and the text represents the tension between collective and singular identities negotiated by Americanization itself. Through the challenge that their father poses to them, the Dehning children hope to make names for themselves, even though in the case of Julia and George, they are named after relatives in the Old World. The conflicting pronouns of the syntax imply a thematic double resistance that is confirmed in the very next sentence of the text: "And this was a cheerful challenge to them for [Henry] liked it and they liked it too with him, to fight strongly against

⁵⁹ Wald 252.

him in the everlasting struggle of conscious unproved power in the young against dogmatic pride in having done it, of the old ones" (9).⁶⁰

Of the Dehning children, it is Julia who resists her father the most, and for this reason, she will remain the primary focus of the present discussion. Julia's honesty, enthusiasm, and determination leave Henry almost "always very ready to yield to her" (18). Central to Julia's charm is her "fair good-looking exterior" and face that is "stamped" with the image of her second-generation mother, a similarly "fair good-looking prosperous woman" (14). However, Julia's attractive appearance and fierce independence betray an internal conflict with the Old World of her father. "Under Julia's very American face, body, clothes and manner and her vigor of the domineering and crude virgin, there were now and then flashes of passion that lit up an older well hidden tradition" (15). It is worth noting that Julia's Americanness is almost entirely *superficial*. Her face and her body are equally as American as her clothes, her mannerisms, and her attitude. In short, Julia looks and plays the part of an American, but her "flashes" of Old World passion suggest that proving her father wrong is about more than just winning him over. Rather, it is about, in the narrator's words, "living down the tempers we are born with," about acknowledging the other *within* herself even as she desires to transform fully and truly into an

⁶⁰ Wald has drawn on Stein's mentorship by William James to describe how selfhood in the novel operates through metaphors of ownership; however, the violent language of the Dehning children's struggle with their father, coupled with the ugly relation of double resistance they convey, suggest that identity in the novel might better be conceived alongside Hegel's master-slave dialectic. In the first place, the Dehning children's subjectivity, at least textually, must be affirmed through identitarian opposition and syntactical negotiation. Just as the philosopher describes the "movement of self-consciousness in relation to another self-consciousness" as a kind of "life and death struggle" to assert itself (Hegel 111, 114), the Dehning children gleefully struggle with their father to assume the "the kind of power that they felt strongly inside them" (*Making of Americans* 9). Although it is unlikely that Stein read Hegel, it is worth noting that the two primary personality types that the narrator proffers later in the novel—respectively, "independent dependent" and "dependent independent"—are precisely ugly in the way they maintain a relation of double resistance with one another.

American (3). Like Stein's description of the writer in "How Writing Is Written," the intergenerational struggle in which Julia engages her father is characterized by two sources of double resistance: an internal struggle to fashion an identity forged of the New World and an external struggle to have that identity acknowledged by her father, a product of the Old World. As we will now see, Julia will seek her emancipation from her father's Old World via a turn to the aesthetic that is just as superficial as her very American face.

Julia Hersland: Aestheticizing the Text

As I have been arguing, Americanization for Stein is a process of double resistance, a phenomenon in which a younger generation attempts to establish its independence from an older generation despite the existential interdependence of both. For Julia Dehning, this process notably plays out in aesthetic terms, through her marriage to Alfred Hersland. Despite her father's protests, Julia becomes smitten with fashionable, mild-mannered, and sufficiently interesting Alfred, who seems to be the embodiment of middle-class respectability. Despite Alfred's class pretensions, what draws Julia to him is what the narrator repeatedly describes as Alfred's "singularity," a sense of self that is arguably attractive because of Julia's own struggle to forge an American identity independent from her father. But while Julia covets Alfred's individuality, the narrator repeatedly emphasizes how Alfred *inhabits* convention rather than transgresses it. Psychologizing Julia, the narrator states: "To a bourgeois mind that has within it a little of the fervor for diversity, there can be nothing more attractive than a strain of singularity that yet keeps well within the limits of conventional respectability a singularity that is, so to speak, well dressed and well set up" (21). Alfred's personality, as we will see, turns out to be as vacuous as the beauty that Julia learns about from him.

According to the narrator, what Julia finds so attractive about Alfred is that, even though he is the child of immigrants like herself, he possesses cultural capital.⁶¹ Bringing “with him the world of art and things, a world to her but vaguely known,” Alfred serves as a foil to Julia’s experience living in the gilded vacuum of middle-class life (22). Evoking one of Henry James’s descriptions of Newport in *The American Scene*, the narrator relates: “In Bridgepoint it was neither gloomy nor yet joyous but *like a large and splendid canvas completely painted but full of empty space*....The Dehning city house was of this sort. A nervous restlessness of luxury was through it all” (28, emphasis added). And later: “It was good riches in this house and here it was that Julia Dehning dreamed of other worlds and here each day she grew more firm in her resolve for that free wide and cultured life to which for her young Hersland had the key” (28). In the Dehning house, Julia is surrounded by signifiers of taste, but something about it all is “restless,” something stirring and ill-at-ease. Her longing for what Alfred represents is itself an indication that she has taken the world of things for granted. She wants meaning; she wants to know how and why the canvas of her life is “full of emptiness,” as if knowing would somehow provide fulfillment. In this sense, Alfred is refined, whereas Julia is described as “crude” (22); she merely inhabits a world of riches, whereas he can supposedly explain their value. Accordingly, the novel’s first use of the word “beauty” occurs when Julia meets Alfred (22).

In the months leading up to Julia’s engagement to Alfred, the narrator increasingly offers observations about the American aesthetic disposition when describing how Julia becomes more emotionally and aesthetically self-conscious. She writes of Julia:

She had had, always, stirring within her, a longing for the knowledge of made things, of works of art, of all the wonders that make, she knew, a world, for certain other people. (Twenty years ago, you know, it was still the dark ages in

⁶¹ Interestingly, even though the Herslands are an immigrant family just like the Dehnings, we are told that they “had not had their money any longer than the others of [their] community, but they had taken to culture and to ideas quicker” (21–22).

America and lectures on art did not grow on every tongue that had tasted the salt air of the mid-Atlantic. It was a feat then to know about hill towns in Italy, one might have heard of Titian and of Rembrandt but Giorgione [*sic*] and Botticelli were still sacred to the few, one did not then yet have to seek, to find for oneself new painters and new places.) It was a very real desire, this longing for the wisdom of all culture, this that had been always strong in Julia. Of course, mostly, such longing in Julia, took the form of moral idealism, the only form of culture the spare American imagination takes natural refuge in. (22)

The passage qualifies Julia's infatuation with Alfred by stating that her interest in "the world of art and things" preceded the couple's romance. In this way, the narrator implies that both Julia's desire for Alfred and her aesthetic longing are emotionally sincere, even if they are curated by her "bourgeois mind." More interestingly, however, the narrator makes two important claims about Americanness that directly concern the aesthetic. First, the narrator parenthetically states that America "was still the dark ages" where it concerns art, suggesting that the fine arts had not yet found a place in national life.⁶² It remains unclear whether the narrator is suggesting that Julia's narrative takes place "twenty years ago...[*in*] the dark ages") or whether Julia lives in a more robust, artistically appreciative present, that of the narrator. Either way, the narrator's second claim about Americanness extends beyond the parenthetical aside to state that Americans writ-large are characterized by a "spare American imagination," insinuating that there is something in the national character that conflates aesthetics with "moral idealism." Taking a cue from Julia's fascination with high culture, the narrator describes the ossification of aesthetic judgment into taste, which superficially distinguishes between good and bad, beautiful and ugly, without any feeling. What is spare about "the spare American imagination,"

⁶² One finds confirmation of the narrator's "Dark Ages" sentiment in connection to the success of the 1913 Armory Show in New York. Event organizer and art-collector John Quinn exuberantly explained away such beliefs to *The New York Times*, stating that the show's "success in attendance and sales demonstrates that the American people as an art-loving people are second only to France" (50,000 VISIT ART SHOW). By 1913, Stein would have completed *The Making of Americans*, and although she did not attend the Armory Show, she and brother Leo did loan several important works by Matisse and Picasso.

the narrator seems to imply, is how it displaces the act of appreciation for a canon of accepted aesthetic judgments. (Hence, the restless luxury of the Dehning household and the seeming emptiness of the town in which it resides.)

Bracketing the narrator's own preferences for Continental art, the above passage suggests that cultural enlightenment—in contrast to “the dark ages in America”—consists of successfully metabolizing the culture of the Old World. To Julia, then, Alfred's allure, his “strain of singularity,” stems from the way he uses the high culture of the Old World as a borrowed beginning, similar to how the orchard scene at the opening of the novel reworked a scene from Montaigne, who in turn drew upon Aristotle. That is to say, a borrowed beginning can become an opening through which an American identity can begin to resist the Old World. In this sense, the Old World of Julia's father persists in the New World even as it is renovated for the purpose of *fabricating*—that is, making and counterfeiting—a new identity. (Appropriately, the title for Georges Hugnet's French translation of *The Making of Americans* is *La fabrication des Américains*.) Central to fabricating a new identity is the double resistance Stein situated in the orchard scene at the beginning of the novel: as one generation inherits the resources of another, metabolizing those resources takes the form of a struggle to exceed the past and therefore make progress.

Like the struggle to say something new that Stein described in “How Writing Is Written,” fashioning a new, American identity inevitably yields unsightly results when Julia has an opportunity to test her aesthetic aspirations. First, we learn that Julia's time with Alfred has almost certainly resulted in an aesthetic education that she brings to bear on the interior design of her home: “In the furnishing of her own house it must be as she wished, *taught as she now had been that there were things of beauty in the world* and that decoration should be strange and like old fashions, not be in the new....*It was queer in its results* this mingling of old taste and new desire” (30, emphasis added). However, as the wedding approaches, Julia becomes increasingly

skeptical of the tastes she has learned and of the man she learned them from. “Hersland had always, a little, meant more to her as an ideal than as a creature to be known and loved. She had made him, to herself, as she was now making her new house, an unharmonious unreality...” (30). Like the flashes of Old World passion that Julia’s “very American” face can betray, the house is in conflict; Julia becomes aware of its unsightliness as “an unharmonious unreality.” A clash, a double resistance arises from curating Old World objects with a New World sensibility; old things are made to look new, and there are just as many new things that are meant to look old. The result is a scandalous rebuttal to the taste of her parents, a sign of her willful self-definition to become a real American, unlike her father.

However, despite Julia’s meticulous interior designs, her home with Alfred is consistently characterized by a *lack* and is described in a play of negative terms. For instance, after the narrator describes how “[a]ll through this new house there were no solid warm substantial riches,” the following passage catalogs the implicit ugliness of Julia’s eclectic design sensibility (31).

The dining room was without brilliancy, for there can be no brilliance in a real aesthetic aspiration. The chairs were made after some old french fashion, not very certain what, and covered with dull tapestry, copied without life from old designs, the room was all a discreet green with simple oaken wood-work underneath. The living rooms were a prevailing red, that certain shade of red like that certain shade of green, *dull, without hope, the shade that so completely bodies forth the ethically aesthetic aspiration of the spare American emotion.* Everywhere were carbon photographs upon the walls sadly framed in painted wooden frames. Free couches, open book-cases, and fire places with really burning logs, finished out each room. (31, emphasis added)

Despite arranging everything to be in accordance with Alfred’s aesthetic education about the value of beauty, Julia’s spare American imagination permeates the house as a “spare American emotion” that recalls the narrator’s invocation of “the dark ages in America.” Here, “Sadly” frames are “dull” in their modernity; imitation French chairs are covered with tapestries “copied

without life”; elsewhere, decorations are described as “sombre” and “dark” (31). And yet despite the lifelessness of the designs—despite it all being “without brilliancy”—the narrator makes the important observation that “there can be no brilliance in a real aesthetic aspiration.” Although Julia supposedly makes informed aesthetic judgments, the implicit ugliness of her house arises from her failure to curate and compose a beautiful whole, which, in turn, underscores the contradiction of her aesthetic education: it is as sincere as it ends up being superficial.

Arguably, the narrator’s maxim about “real aesthetic aspiration” anticipates the outcome of Julia’s marriage to Alfred, which eventually fails. In successfully designing a tastefully modern home according to Alfred’s aestheticism, Julia sees that “the world of art and things” that Alfred brought to her does not yield the “things of beauty in the world” that she was taught about. In this way, the novel’s conventional marriage plot fizzles out. There is no brilliancy in their home, no beauty, no story book ending. But at the same time, the tastes that Julia has picked up are the result of her “very real desire” to use the aesthetic as a key to fulfilling her goal of becoming an individual, of resisting her father in their ongoing relation of double resistance. While the home becomes a stand-in for Julia’s individuality, it gets completely taken up by Alfred’s tastes. As we saw early on, Julia coveted Alfred’s individuality, but his “strain of singularity” was not actually unique; as a member of the cultural elite, he uses the superficiality of beauty to re-appropriate Old World culture with New World tastes. In this sense, when Julia designs her house with a “queer” clash of old and new, it fails to yield satisfying results because, like the family name Julia will take from Alfred, it is not her own nor is it truly anything new. In the remainder of the novel, Julia internalizes the double resistance of her relationship with her father into a double resistance with herself and with her ideals, but it is ultimately a muted struggle. While feminist critics like Lisa Ruddick have noted that *The Making of Americans* progressively reworks patriarchal themes, Julia’s aesthetic education is, on the contrary, fairly

regressive.⁶³ Her quest for individuation, her struggle to become a person independent of her father, ultimately entangles her into another patriarchal structure—as *Mrs.* Alfred Hersland.

The Narrator: On Formlessness and Disfiguration

At a crucial point early on in the novel, the narrator intervenes to directly warn the reader about the expectations they may bring to the unfolding family history she tells. “[T]hose who read much in story books surely now can tell what to expect of her,” she says of Julia, implying that the “flashes” of Old World in her character might pose a challenge to her quest to fashion a distinctly American self. The narrator continues: “...I am not ready yet to take away the character from our Julia...reader, please remember, the future is not yet certain for her, and *be you well warned reader, from the vain-glory of being sudden in your judgment of her*” (15, emphasis added). Such a disruption of the plot not only draws attention to the implicit melodrama undergirding the novel’s marriage plot between Julia and Alfred, but, more importantly, it also works to directly hail the reader, insinuating them into an aesthetic circuit similar to the one depicted in Leo Stein’s anecdote about Matisse, the model, and the ugly statuette. In urging the reader not to hasten their judgment of Julia, the narrator draws attention to the role the reader plays in their own aesthetic experience of the text. Furthermore, the possessive phrase “our Julia” reminds the reader that they share an affective investment with the narrator through Julia’s character. However, this sentiment is immediately qualified with the rather ambiguous declaration that the “the future is not yet certain” for Julia, which reminds the reader that characters figuratively have lives of their own, independent of the expectations readers may

⁶³ A quick example of the novel’s progressive feminism: Ruddick’s autobiographical reading of *The Making of Americans* identifies an Oedipal drama in the opening to the novel, arguing that Stein’s identification with the angry son serves as a “compromise persona” for her as a woman writer working in a masculinist literary tradition (59).

have from the romances or “story books” with which they might be familiar.⁶⁴ In short, this early interruption of the plot works to establish an aesthetic circuit that cultivates the reader’s self-awareness *as a reader*.

Not unlike Julia’s relation of double resistance with her father, a relation in which her subjectivity emerges through a trope of violent struggle, the reader of *The Making of Americans* learns upon the narrator’s first truly sustained interruption that the voice that keeps disrupting the text is none other than *the writer* of the text herself. Having begun narrating the novel, having directly addressed the reader, and, now, having identified herself as the writer of the text, the narrator fully triangulates the aesthetic circuit between text and reader, but does so in order to voice her anxiety about how the novel will be received. In a passage that anticipates the long, undulating sentences that characterize the novel’s later chapters, the narrator directly addresses the reader once again:

Bear it in your mind my reader, but truly I never feel it that there ever can be for me any such a creature, no it is this scribbled and dirty and lined paper that is really to be to me always my receiver, —but anyhow reader, bear it in your mind—will there be for me ever any such a creature, —what I have said always before to you, that this that I write down a little each day here on my scraps of paper for you is not just an ordinary kind of novel with a plot and conversations to amuse you, but a record of a decent family progress respectably lived by us and our fathers and our mothers, and our grand-fathers, and grand-mothers, and this is by me carefully a little each day to be written down here; and so my reader arm yourself in every kind of a way to be patient, and to be eager, for you must always have it now before you to hear much more of these many kinds of decent ordinary people....And so listen while I tell you all about us, and wait while I hasten slowly forwards, and love, please, this history of this decent family’s progress. (33–34, emphasis added)

This lengthy digression works on three levels. First, it makes the narrator the focus of the narrative by directly implicating her in the story she tells; second, it makes the reader aware of the novel as an artistic object in the sense that it is actively being crafted; and, finally, but

⁶⁴ See Chase’s classic study *The American Novel and Its Tradition* for a full discussion of the novel’s differences from the romance.

perhaps most importantly, it inaugurates the novel's ongoing anxiety, via the narrator, about its reception by the reader. As we are told, this is not an "ordinary kind of novel" meant to elicit pleasure; instead, it will require that readers "arm [themselves] in every kind of a way to be patient, and to be eager," and the narrator even doubts the possibility that she will ever have an appreciative reader of the "scribbled and dirty and lined paper" and the lowly "scraps" upon which she writes. Despite such self-effacement, the narrator exhorts the reader to "love, please"—almost in spite of itself—"this history of this decent family's progress." Just as the reader must keep reading, the narrator must keep writing, but the question of the novel's final judgment is left a resounding echo throughout the remainder of a text that is effectively in-process and that is self-consciously drawing attention to its own making.

As the narrator implies above by declaring "so listen while I tell you all about us," *The Making of Americans* is a deeply autobiographical novel, so in some sense it is not surprising that she eventually bursts through the frame narrative about the Dehnings and the Herslands in order to tell her own story. Using the history of a decent family's progress as a borrowed beginning—like the novel's Aristotelian opening, like Julia's appropriation of Old World culture, and even like the persona of Alice B. Toklas in Stein's bestselling autobiography—the narrator uses her characters to write a book for and about herself. In particular, Julia's struggle to fashion an American identity—and that struggle's particular manifestation through a frustrated pursuit of beauty via Alfred—is the pretense for the narrator to intrude upon the text and eventually emerge as its main character. As the narrator takes up the question of aesthetic judgment from Julia, one that now involves loving implicitly unlovable artistic creations such as the scraps of paper upon which she writes, I argue that the text becomes increasingly *uglified*. By this I mean that the text demonstrates formal characteristics of ugliness, which I draw from Karl Rosenkranz's *The Aesthetics of Ugliness* (1853), and that these characteristics—formlessness,

disfiguration, and incorrectness—become the terms by which the narrator asserts a kind of textual subjectivity that is distinct from Stein. However, in order to better understand how these ugly characteristics formally manifest in text, I will first isolate two moments when ugliness is taken up as an explicit subject.

The two moments in question shed light on the narrator's investment in the ugly. The first is a simple description of a minor character, Alfred's mother's servant. The narrator states: "She was a blond little woman and...mostly every one thought her an ugly blond little servant, *really she had a kind of little servant girl beauty in her*" (172). The second moment comes much later in the text:

It is a very strange feeling when one is loving a clock that is to every one of your class of living an ugly and a foolish one and one really likes such a thing and likes it very much and liking it is a serious thing...or you write a book and while you write it you are ashamed for every one must think you are a silly or a crazy one and yet you write it and you are ashamed, you know you will be laughed at or pitied by every one and you have a queer feeling and you are not very certain and you go on writing.... (485–86)

In both cases, aesthetic judgments about ugliness are upheld by "every one"—a stand-in for what Kant in the Third Critique terms *sensus communis* (quite literally "common sense").⁶⁵ In both cases, the narrator invokes a broad consensus confirming ugliness as a transgression—against beauty in the case of the servant, against taste in the case of the clock. In either instance, however, both become occasions for aesthetic appreciation, even admiration. The narrator finds beauty in the servant girl, and she describes "loving" the clock with great seriousness, even though it causes her to be held in low esteem by others. In addition to pointing out the relativism of aesthetic judgment, much like Stein did in "How Writing Is Written," the narrator ties the discussion of the clock's ugliness to the writing process, which, as we observed in a previous

⁶⁵ Kant, § 40 "Taste as a kind of *sensus communis*" in *Critique of Judgment*.

passage, made the narrator anxious enough to plead with the reader to “love, please” her text. Implicit in both moments is a sense that the ugly is unworthy of being loved, and it is precisely through what she loves most—her writing—that the narrator attempts to fashion an American identity distinct from her novelistic forbearers.

As has been mentioned, *The Making of Americans* will formalize its fascination with ugliness, and the narrator’s intrusion into the frame narrative begins to bestow upon the novel an amorphous quality as her presence eventually overtakes the plot and directs the novel to more abstract lines of inquiry. For example, in the middle of discussing the Hersland children—Alfred, Martha, and David—the narrator mentions her fascination with the fact that “[t]here are many kinds of men, there are many kinds of women there are many kinds of ways of mixing them in the children that come out of them” (116). The reader learns that the narrator possesses a passion for recognizing and categorizing various personality types, doing so by observing a person’s actions, words, and habits. (As Stein clarifies in her lecture, “Portraits and Repetition,” it is through repetition that the “rhythm of a personality” emerges.⁶⁶) Then, at the beginning of the Martha Hersland chapter, the narrator effectively repurposes the novel to make her personal love of repetition the focus of the remainder of the text:

There are many that I know and they know it. They are all of them repeating and I hear it. I love it and I tell it. I love it and *now I will write it. This is now a history of my love of it.* I hear it and I love it and I write it. They repeat it. They live it and I see it and I hear it. They live it and I hear it and I see it and I love it and *now and always I will write it.* There are many kinds of men and women and I know it. They repeat it and I hear it and I love it. *This is now a history of the way they do it. This is now a history of the way I love it.* (291, emphasis added)

If the narrator had desperately urged the reader to “love, please” her text, here, she suddenly has the self-assurance to transform the text into an autobiographical chronicle of her own love

⁶⁶ G. Stein, *Lectures in America* 175.

of repetition. While the passage is effervescent with the narrator's passion, it has a significant effect of altering the novel's original purpose. From this moment onward, even when conveying details of the Dehnings and the Herslands, the narrator emerges as a character in her own right. After all, Julia's story is also the narrator's story; for, as we learned from the novel's opening pages, both belong to the same generation of grandchildren, suggesting that the narrator's dramatic emergence echoes Julia's desperation to fashion a distinctly American identity.

The abruptness of the above passage—its repetition of the word “now”—has an important, threefold effect. In the first place, it signals a degradation of the novel's plot along the lines of the formlessness that Karl Rosenkranz describes in *The Aesthetics of Ugliness*. “Shapelessness,” he writes, “can...consist in a transition to the positive opposite of the initial design. It announces to us a form, but instead of the expected, the opposite appears, a dissolution of the original form...its destruction.”⁶⁷ Whereas earlier the narrator had described how the novel was a history of a decent family's progress, now it is instead—or perhaps *also*—to become a history of the narrator's emphatic love of repetition and of cataloging various human kinds. In the second place, the narrator's love of repetition mirrors, metatextually, the novel's themes of Americanization as an ongoing drama of double resistance. Just as Julia used the culture of the Old World as a borrowed beginning to forge her own American identity, the narrator borrows the story of the Dehnings and the Herslands in order to tell her own autobiographical tale. Although the narrator confidently declares, “This is now a history of the way *I* love it,” she will continually struggle—as Julia did with her father—with the writing of the text, grappling with where it ends and she begins. The third and perhaps most important effect of the narrator's undoing of the frame narrative returns us to the aesthetic circuit. Just

⁶⁷ Rosenkranz 68.

pages before the above passage, the very first lines of the Martha Hersland chapter reaffirm the aesthetic circuit between reader, writer, and text, with the narrator declaring, “I am writing for myself and strangers. This is the only way that I can do it” (289). Thus, as the history of the Dehnings and the Herslands gives way “to be more and more a history of every one who ever was or is or will be living,” for the narrator to acknowledge the reader’s presence before devolving into her own autobiography effectively forces the reader into a relation of double resistance with the text (284–85). Like the novel’s opening scene between father and son, the devolution of the frame narrative into the narrator’s autobiography will end up dragging the reader across an unwieldy novelistic orchard of repetitions that is so off-putting, they may very well let slip a cry of “Stop!” Nevertheless, the reader will surely see that, as *The Making of Americans* reshapes itself under the pressures of the narrator’s “I,” this is indeed in no way an “ordinary kind of novel.”

Exploring Stein’s enduring fascination with conceptualizing wholes, Jennifer Ashton has pursued how *The Making of Americans* both insists upon and eludes its central question: Is it truly possible to make a complete history of all people—past, present, and future? For Ashton, the stylistic shift from a nineteenth-century marriage plot to the narrator realizing a curatorial project about different kinds of being stems from the inability of the novel to answer that question under its narrative pretense as a history of an American family’s progress. As Ashton argues, “For Stein the incompleteness of nineteenth-century explanation has to do both with what is being explained...and with the fact of there being someone to whom or for whom it is explained.”⁶⁸ For Ashton, it is the reader who theoretically “completes” the narrator’s impossible project of compiling a history of all people; the act of reading the book continues what should

⁶⁸ Ashton 290.

be a practically endless project. While this view is convincing on its surface, the mathematical and philosophical basis that Ashton emphasizes in Stein's ongoing engagement with wholeness overlooks something much simpler: the narrator seems to foreclose the possibility of completion when she earlier doubts that her writing will ever have a reader. With this in mind, the novel's abrupt transition from a history of family's progress to a history of all of humanity appears to draw more attention to the aesthetic circuit it weaves than it does to the narrative or project that the novel offers on its surface.

As if perversely heeding the narrator's earlier warning to arm oneself against the novel, critic Janet Malcolm recalls chopping up the novel with a kitchen knife not just to make it more "portable," but, implicitly, to combat the novel's formlessness. "As I read," Malcolm writes, "*I realized that in carving up the book I had unwittingly made a physical fact of its stylistic and thematic inchoateness.*" It is a book that is actually a number of books. It is called a novel, but in reality it is a series of long meditations on, among other things, the author's refusal (and inability) to write a novel.⁶⁹ For Malcolm, the novel is, at best, "a text of magisterial disorder" and, at worst, "a work that Stein evidently had to get out of her system," likening the author's process to vomiting or defecating.⁷⁰ Despite the critic's admiration for Stein as a person, Malcolm's urge to take a knife to the novel not only reveals the extreme alienation caused by the text, but, in her own words, it also makes the critic aware of the text's formlessness. Although she doubts Stein's ability to write a novel, Malcolm inadvertently acknowledges her own place in the carefully constructed aesthetic circuit between author, text, and reader. "As *The Making of Americans* progresses," she writes, "it resembles less and less a novel and more and more a morass

⁶⁹ Malcolm 114.

⁷⁰ Malcolm 134, 121.

into which writer and reader are sinking together.”⁷¹ Indeed, for Malcolm, the amorphousness of the novel means that it has *failed* in its artistry—or, even worse, that it has failed to be aesthetic at all.

Malcolm’s extreme attempt to impose order on *The Making of Americans* stems not only from the formlessness of the novel but also from the text’s most notable stylistic feature: its disfiguring use of repetition. In *The Aesthetics of Ugliness*, Rosenkranz describes disfiguration as “the deformation of forms” through “a positive negation of actual freedom.”⁷² To put this in simple terms, artistic disfiguration—as opposed to, say, naturalistic deformation—involves the active disruption of a recognizable genre or formal style. Although Rosenkranz analyzes literary examples of such as poetry and drama, the dramatic modernism of Stein’s style exceeds the categories of disfiguration explored by the German philosopher in the mid-nineteenth century, namely, the mean, the repulsive, and caricature (the last of which I discuss in Chapter 2). That being said, I argue that Stein’s idiosyncratic use of repetition nevertheless qualifies as a particularly modern instance of disfiguration, because it actively stalls the plot of *The Making of Americans* and thereby allows the narrator to tell her autobiography—or in her own words, the history of “the loving there is *in me* for repeating” (291, emphasis added). Whereas formlessness refers to the figurative shape of the novel, we might think of disfiguration as the novel’s emphatic textuality or texture. As a kind of literary graffiti, repetition “defaces” the novel’s marriage plot between the Julia and Alfred with the narrator’s own story, requiring the reader to decipher layers of accumulated meaning that refer at once to the characters, to the narrator’s desires, and, as we will see in the next section of this chapter, to the emotional experience of reading itself. But first, let us turn to the narrator’s use of repetition as it relates to the story she tells.

⁷¹ Malcolm 121.

⁷² Rosenkranz 116, 120.

As *The Making of Americans* progresses with the narrator's desire to categorize the being of all life that ever was, is, or will be, the style of the novel becomes increasingly off-putting as it incorporates undulating repetitions in the pursuit of abstract, ontological ideas. Emblematic of the novel's style, the following description of Alfred Hersland shows how such emphatic textuality is not merely gratuitous; it also serves as a subtle means of aestheticizing and making-autobiographical the narrator's curatorial project. The narrator writes:

Alfred Hersland is to me a piece of being, he is not in me a whole one, this is certain, mostly every one is to me a piece of being, every one has their own being in them, **Alfred Hersland has his own being in him, alright, I know** it of every one, I know it that every one has their own being in them, I know it and always I feel it, I always feel it and I always know it, every one has their own being in them yes every one, every kind of a one, every one that ever was or is or will be living, yes, alright, I know it of every one that every one has their own being in them, **Alfred Hersland had his own being in him, yes** every one has their own being in them, yes that is alright, I know that of them, I know that very well of them, I know every one has their own being in them, I feel it of them, I know that always in every one, always in each one, always of every one, yes I know that each one has their own being in them and *I am saying that mostly every one is a piece of being, not a whole one in them and so then there is not any use of the world going on for any one, and there is not any way of making a complete one of any being by putting together all of some kinds of them all of any kind of them for each one has their own being in them and so after all there is not any way of making a whole one.* Every one to me just now is as a piece to me, that is to say each one mostly is not a complete one of anything to my feeling, each one just now to my feeling is a piece of something and that is to me very certain by my very strongly realising in every one the way they are not thinking, feeling a complete thing of their kind in feeling and thinking. Now then **Alfred Hersland is a piece of being to me** and now I will tell of it the way I feel it in me, the way I feel him and every one just now in me. (521–22, all emphases mine)

In this three-sentence paragraph (!), readers—if they have not abandoned the text by this point—have come a long way from the marriage of Julia Dehning and Alfred Hersland. This moment is striking because, in addition to the narrator casting her ontological project with what Jeremy Braddock would describe as “collecting aesthetic,” she is also, here, forestalled by her

subject.⁷³ While Alfred was implicitly *unoriginal* when we first met him, here he frustrates the narrator's capacity to appreciate his personality because he represents a new kind of being. (And one might wonder, too, if he frustrates the narrator because of his associations with the superficial.) As she grapples with his kind of being, the narrator uses repetition as an *expansive* form of disfiguration, one that not only results in long, recursive syntax, but one that also stretches circuitry between reader, text, and the narrator (as writer).

The repetition of the passage works on two interrelated registers involving Alfred and the narrator. In the first register, Alfred becomes the subject of a tautological statement after the narrator mentions his name four times. The first time she invokes his name—"Alfred Hersland is to me a piece of being"—the narrator makes a subjective ontological claim. We are told that Alfred "is," but the ontological description (he is "a piece of being") is qualified by her own perspective ("to me"). The narrator is uncertain about Alfred—he puzzles her—and this description serves to tell the reader about her ability to classify him according to the terms of her own project. Is Alfred an "independent dependent" type of being or a "dependent independent" type? Is he an "attacking being" or a "resisting being"? As with the earlier passage in which Julia struggled against her father, the narrator appears to grapple with Alfred's being as she struggles to define her own sense of self.

We perhaps see some evidence of the narrator's struggle with Alfred when the second invocation of his name occurs: "Alfred Hersland *has* his own being in him, alright." This description creates tension by undercutting the narrator's first observation with its emphatic "alright." If Alfred is, in fact, "a whole one"—if he has an identity and the narrator knows that she can classify him—why does she only see him as a "piece of being"? What is more, when

⁷³ See Braddock for a fuller exploration of the importance of the collecting paradigm within modernism.

Alfred's name is mentioned a third time, a shift in tenses undercuts the narrator's certainty about Alfred actually having an identity at all. In the phrase "Alfred Hersland *had* his own being in him, yes every one has their own being in them," the past-tense "had" calls into question the very identity being affirmed by the narrator's emphatic "yes." It raises the question: If everyone has an identity, what happened to Alfred's? Furthermore, what has happened between the phrases "Alfred has" and "Alfred had"? The fourth and final invocation of Alfred's name returns us to the narrator's initial observation, but with a subtle difference. While we started with "Alfred Hersland is *to me* a piece of being," the narrator ends with "Alfred Hersland is a piece of being *to me*." Thus, the paragraph essentially puts forth a tautology: it is as if the narrator is saying, "Alfred Hersland is to me a piece of being, *because* Alfred Hersland is a piece of being to me."

What is a reader to make of such repetition? As Tanya E. Clement has shown through invaluable "distant" readings of *The Making of Americans*, "Repetition plays a profound role" in the novel, but, more importantly, she observes that "the text is intricately and purposely structured."⁷⁴ For example, in addition to identifying evidence that modes of repetition change halfway through the text (evidence, we might point out, of the novel's ugly asymmetry), Clement also observes that two nearly 500-word sections appear verbatim across the text, an interesting observation considering that of the 517,207 total words used in the novel, only 5,329 are unique.⁷⁵

⁷⁴ Clement, "'A thing not beginning and not ending'" 362, 63.

⁷⁵ See Clement, "'A thing not beginning and not ending'" as well as "The story of *one*: Narrative and Composition in Gertrude Stein's *The Making of Americans*." In the latter essay, Clement argues that the narrator emerges as a primary character, especially through the plural pronoun "one."

While the digital tools associated with “distant” reading prove incredibly exciting to consider the intentional—that is, artistic—formlessness underlying *The Making of Americans*, one inevitably loses the texture of the novel without returning to close reading, which brings us back to the way repetition functions in the above passage to proffer the following tautology: “Alfred Hersland is to me a piece of being, *because* Alfred Hersland is a piece of being to me.” What is the purpose of the narrator cutting up the phrase about Alfred’s being into various permutations? The passage’s ultimate tautology can be explained by the second register of the passage, which focuses the phrase on the narrator even though Alfred Hersland remains the syntactical subject. In the first iteration of the phrase, the narrator foregrounds her perspective by placing “to me” earlier in the sentence: “Alfred Hersland is *to me* a piece of being.” The final iteration withholds “to me” until later in order to make more of an identitarian claim (i.e., A = A): “Alfred Hersland is a piece of being *to me*.” As a result, “Alfred is” suggests a more objective description than “Alfred is to me.” In either case, though, the reader does not get an objective definition of Alfred’s identity; they do not get an absolute definition of what he is as “a whole one.” Nevertheless, the final invocation of Alfred’s name does double as a true statement for the narrator: *to her*, Alfred is, in fact, a piece of being, because his wholeness is not immediately recognizable to her. While this may be incredibly hard to follow for the reader, to the narrator, repetition is the process by which she derives important information for her project categorizing various human kinds. Although something about Alfred evades the narrator, she nevertheless attempts to name it. In doing so, the narrator not only tells us something about Alfred but also something about her project and about herself. In the first place, the narrator comes to the realization that “after all there is not any way of making a whole one [in some people]”; upon seeing Alfred’s fragmented being, she realizes that she will not be able to complete her project of categorizing all humankind. A notable thematic shift in the repetition, from objective to

subjective, accompanies this realization. While the narrator had earlier been repeating variations of the phrase “I know,” as if assuring herself of her own credibility, the passage transitions to repeating the language of feeling.⁷⁶ “Now then Alfred Hersland is a piece of being to me,” she asserts, “and now I will tell of it the way I *feel* it in me, the way I *feel* him and every one just now in me.” Although she engages in a rather academic enterprise, feeling becomes a way of knowing and tautology a form of autobiographical insistence that disfigures the narrative.

Wrestling with Feeling: On Emotion and Incorrectness

As the narrator grapples with describing Alfred Hersland’s being among many, many others, she increasingly comes to rely on feeling as a broader means of realizing her project. In fact, the narrator becomes increasingly emotional as the novel progresses, worrying at times if anyone will ever love her work the way she herself does. “Perhaps no one ever will know the complete history of every one. This is a sad thing,” she writes. “Perhaps no one will ever have as a complete thing the history of any one. This is a very sad thing” (453). At one point, the narrator even attempts to steel herself in order to keep writing, declaring, “I am going on writing, I am going on now....Mostly no one will be wanting to listen. I am certain. *I am important inside me and not any one really is listening to me.* I am wishing every one knew every one

⁷⁶ In contrast to the confident “I know” of the passage involving Alfred Hersland, the narrator will later repeat the phrase “I know Julia Dehning” so many times that it suggests her uncertainty regarding Julia’s character:

I know Julia Dehning. Certainly I know Julia Dehning. Yes of course I know Julia Dehning. Have I not certainly come to know Julia Dehning. I certainly have come to know Julia Dehning, I know Julia Dehning, I have known Julia Dehning, I am thinking I will know Julia Dehning. How do I know Julia Dehning, I know Julia Dehning as one at the end of her beginning living, at the beginning of her middle living, at the middle of her middle living. I know Julia Dehning... (630)

and wanted to have me make diagrams of all the kinds there are of men and women and the place in this diagram of each one" (595, emphasis added). Although it may be strange for a narrator to declare her own importance, she finds herself isolated—it is unlikely, again, that the typical reader who began with novel's initial marriage plot has endured so much repetition—yet the narrator continues to write, remaining motivated by her subject. She reflects, "And here I am almost all alone in really completely loving repeating, loving it that each one all his living is repeating all his being" (601). Just before this quote, she somewhat anxiously recalls everyone's dislike of repeating, while just after, she begins to talk about failure—a portentous meditation after discussing her will to go on writing.

As one of the novel's most careful readers, E. L. McCallum, has recently argued, the emotional life of the narrator ultimately substitutes for the notable absence of plot in the novel.⁷⁷ However, as I will now show, theoretically minded readings that emphasize the importance of emotion in the novel, such as McCallum's and Sianne Ngai's, spend so much time focusing on the subjectivity of the reader that they tend to overlook the peculiar nature of the aesthetic short-circuit that occurs when the narrator becomes the writer of the text and ends up authoring her autobiography in the process. As we will now see, emotional readings of *The Making of Americans*—and, I argue, of ugliness more broadly—tend to overlook the text's relational aesthetic strategies, which facilitate *exchanges* of subjectivity through its form. While it is precisely through the narrator's obfuscations that a reader is confronted with their aesthetic presumptions about their readerly experience, emotional arguments ultimately aim to relocate agency within a reader, avoiding the awkwardness of the "aha moment" that we saw of the model before Matisse's ugly statuette.

⁷⁷ See McCallum, "A Spare American Emotion."

While I do not dispute McCallum's very important claim that emotion is central to *The Making of Americans*—especially to the narrator as the novel's central character—I do diverge with her articulation of the novel's relation to the aesthetic. Although McCallum is one of the few critics to examine the importance of the narrator as an entity separate from Stein, her recent landmark study, *Unmaking The Making of Americans: Toward an Aesthetic Ontology*, reads the novel within the Kantian framework of aesthetic judgment, a framework that, unsurprisingly values the beautiful as its ultimate object.⁷⁸ While McCallum's work offers insightful close readings of Stein's novel, and savvy theoretical discussions that go well beyond the text, it will be less pertinent to the present exploration of ugliness since, as I argue, beauty consistently appeals to emotion to do its bidding. Consider the following discussion of beauty and feeling by Stein's college professor, George Santayana, whom I discuss in the Introduction to this project. "To feel beauty is a better thing than to understand how we come to feel it," writes Santayana in *The Sense of Beauty* (1896), adding later: "It suffuses an object without telling why; nor has it any need to ask the question. *It justifies itself and the vision it gilds*; nor is there any meaning in seeking for a cause of it, in this inward sense."⁷⁹ McCallum is certainly aware of how beauty is in no way disinterested (indeed, this is one of her main points). However, Santayana's model of beauty as a "gilded object" reveals how the subject that judges ends up constituting the entirety of the aesthetic circuit: their feeling and emotion gradually supplant the object itself.

If, for Santayana, beauty functions as a kind of gilded way of seeing, then we might say that *The Making of Americans* presents the gilding process gone wrong. Emotions run wild, and perhaps the greatest sign of this is that the narrator's repetitions become unwieldy. However, while this is without a doubt a highly emotional text, my previous discussion about how

⁷⁸ See McCallum, *Unmaking The Making of Americans*.

⁷⁹ Santayana 163, emphasis added.

tautology operated in the narrator's exploration of Alfred Hersland's being should indicate that this is a highly cognitive text as well. As Sharon J. Kirsch observes, "Stein's interest in repetition and recreating ideas in language demonstrates a rhetorician's interest in how ideas are conveyed from writers to audiences, from past to present, from memory to words."⁸⁰ Every repetition, like every interjection of "I" in the text, reminds the reader of the narrator's presence; she interpolates herself into the story of the Dehnings and the Herslands and recalls to the reader that she is writing the very novel they are reading. In this way, repetition becomes a mode of artistic realization, an insistence that aesthetic progress is being made. Repetition, as Kirsch indicates, is a form of rhetorical emphasis, and the narrator's emotional bursts of repetition have the effect of making the reader self-conscious of their place in the aesthetic circuit. Or, to borrow a phrase from Malcolm, "we never forget that we are reading while reading"—this even if the novel is probably unlike anything we have ever read before.⁸¹

One of McCallum's greatest critical influences has had a tremendous impact on literary studies more broadly and has used *The Making of Americans* to rethink the affects that artworks can elicit. Sianne Ngai's groundbreaking work on "ugly feelings" describes a range of underprivileged, non-cathartic affects—such as envy, irritation, anxiety, and paranoia—that give rise to "ambivalent situations of suspended agency."⁸² Central to Ngai's work—and, by extension, McCallum's reading of Stein—is (in the former's words) "a systematic problematization" of the relation between subject and object.⁸³ Accordingly, Ngai influentially defines *tone* as "the dialectic of objective and subjective feeling that our aesthetic encounters

⁸⁰ See Kirsch.

⁸¹ Malcolm 136.

⁸² Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* 1.

⁸³ Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* 21.

inevitably produce.”⁸⁴ While Ngai’s work has been instrumental in rethinking aesthetic categories and in recovering underprivileged modes of aesthetic expression, my own reading of *The Making of Americans* through Stein’s articulation of ugliness as double resistance will call into question Ngai’s dialectical model of subject-object relations.

In Stein’s work, Ngai sees an attempt to “affectively reorganiz[e] the subject’s relationship to language through stylistic innovation.”⁸⁵ Although she does not focus on the narrator, Ngai reads a seemingly postmodern textuality into *The Making of Americans* that she describes as “stuplime”—that is, it elicits an unusual affective state of astonishment and fatigue that builds upon the Kantian definition of the sublime. For Ngai, the sublime “marks the persistence of an older aesthetic tradition where it was typically invoked in response to things overwhelmingly vast or massive and large (mountains, seas, the infinite, and so forth)—things that threaten to crush the subjectivity out of us...and point to the limits of our psychological and cognitive faculties.”⁸⁶ While she admits that the sublime accurately describes *The Making of Americans*, Ngai amends this definition to include the stupefying, postmodern affects of boredom and shock arising from the text’s characteristic use of repetition. For her, the textual effect of such repetition is one of *agglutination*, or of language becoming dense as its units rapidly accumulate; for readers, such repetition is overwhelming, something like fighting to stay afloat against a sheer deluge of words.

While in “How Writing Is Written,” Stein described ugliness as a relation of double resistance, and while we have seen how this definition is triangulated by an aesthetic circuit among reader, writer, and text, for Ngai, the stuplime offers the reader “resistance as a form of

⁸⁴ Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* 30.

⁸⁵ Ngai, “Stuplimity” n.p.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

critical agency.”⁸⁷ Interestingly, Ngai draws on Stein to invoke the language of resistance. “While stuplimity offers no fantasy of transcendence,” she writes, “it does provide small subjects with what Stein calls ‘a little resistance’ in the confrontations with larger systems.”⁸⁸ While Ngai is certainly aware throughout her work of the complexity of aesthetic circuits, she appears to forsake the intricacy of the short-circuit exposed by the narrator. Indeed, by focusing on the emotional experience of the reader, Ngai surprisingly overlooks the emotional life of the narrator (in contrast to McCallum), which in turn leads her to treat the novel as a series of empty repetitions rather than as a subjectivity with which the reader is constantly interacting. Hence, in my view, emotionally inflected readings of *The Making of Americans*—and emotional arguments about ugliness more broadly—tend to make the audience constitute the entirety of the aesthetic circuit, even if this is not the critical intention. Though Ngai cautions against “turning...[an] emotional response to the writing into an attribute of the writing in itself,” this becomes difficult to do when critics themselves privilege one form of resistance (that of the alienated reader) over the double resistance (between reader and narrator) that Stein carefully sought to cultivate.⁸⁹

Although Ngai’s work aspires to describe a dialectical relation between subject and object, considering that *The Making of Americans* is a text that self-consciously draws attention to its own making, perhaps a more generative theoretical line of inquiry to consider subjectivity in relation to the novel’s ugliness is a *formal* one rather than an emotional one. While Ngai’s stuplime suggests that the novel’s ugliness threatens to overwhelm, if not evacuate, a reader’s subjectivity, curator Nicolas Bourriaud’s influential conception of “relational aesthetics” offers

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

a theory of form that more broadly questions how the aesthetic takes for granted the static nature of subjectivity.⁹⁰ Examining the rise of public-facing contemporary art since the 1990s, Bourriaud conceives of art as “a social interstice” with a capacity to denaturalize subjectivity through the encounter with otherness it inherently facilitates through its form.⁹¹ Contending “subjectivity can only be defined by the presence of a second subjectivity,” Bourriaud argues that “[a]rtistic practice is always a relationship with the other, at the same time it is always a relationship with the world.”⁹² As artists produce works and beholders encounter them, the artwork becomes the site of a subjective exchange not unlike what we saw with Leo Stein’s earlier anecdote about Matisse’s model and the ugly statuette: artist and beholder find themselves enmeshed in an aesthetic circuit that they shape as much as it is shaped by them.

Fittingly, in *Relational Aesthetics* Bourriaud cites an untitled photograph of flowers on Gertrude Stein’s grave before articulating what he describes as “a beholder’s ethic” in contemporary art. The photograph, in turn, leads Bourriaud to ask the following question of any work of art: “Does it give me [the viewer] a chance to exist in front of it, or on the contrary does it deny me as a subject, refusing to consider the Other in its structure?”⁹³ In the case of the photograph that Bourriaud cites (but does not show), nothing except for the non-title, *Untitled* (Alice B. Toklas and Gertrude Stein’s Grave Paris, France), indicates the specificity of the location. A close-up of flowers that seemingly could have been taken anywhere, the photograph

⁹⁰ Ngai’s investment in thinking ugliness alongside the question of subjectivity resonates with Mark Cousins’s psychoanalytic argument that the ugly induces anxiety about the idea of a unified self. For Cousins, “Ugliness in its radical and violent operations exposes the precariousness of the subject, especially the subject’s relations to objects in space” (“The UGLY [part 2]” 6). See his three-part essay, “THE UGLY,” which inventively describes ugliness as a traumatic experience for subjectivity.

⁹¹ Bourriaud 45.

⁹² Bourriaud 91, 85.

⁹³ Bourriaud 57.

simultaneously shuts out the viewer while opening itself up to their consolation. Taken by a queer artist who died of AIDS, the photograph's generic qualities are, according to Bourriaud, compounded by its specific and unapologetic "posit[ing of] female homosexuality" via Stein's relationship to Toklas. (The same artist would place art installations of wrapped hard candies in galleries and encourage visitors to consume them, in turn cultivating an awareness of the aesthetic relationality such as Bourriaud describes.)

While it may seem strange to invoke *The Making of Americans*, a high modernist text, alongside a theorist who has described the aura of artworks shifting toward their publics, perhaps it should not be so when considering the narrator's constant awareness of her audience.⁹⁴ "*I write for myself and strangers*," she states, "No one who knows me can like it. At least they mostly do not like it that every one is of a kind of men and women and I see it. *I love it and I write it. / I want readers* so strangers must do it" (289, emphasis added). As Bourriaud's framework makes clear, the narrator has self-consciously incorporated the other into the structure of the novel by consistently hailing the reader. Indeed, as we have seen, the narrator is anxious about her text's reception, so much so, that her emotional distress largely seems to revolve around her fear about how she will be judged via the work she writes. However, before examining the consequences of the novel's relational aesthetic strategies alongside the aesthetic short-circuit I have been tracking, I first turn to the third and final characteristic of ugliness I track in this chapter: incorrectness.

⁹⁴ It is worth noting that Bourriaud is relatively ambivalent about the subject of beauty (p. 63) and that, in contrast to *The Making of Americans*, a notably schematic project, he argues that art should be universal, not invested in categorization (p. 50). However, it is also worth observing that this emphatically ugly novel collapses under the weight of its initial categorical imperative.

In *The Aesthetics of Ugliness*, Rosenkranz argues that “[a]n artwork...can only be correct insofar as it holds to the limits that lie within the particular medium of an art.”⁹⁵ In general, incorrectness results in ugliness when falseness or deviation occurs, such as in painting, when one mixes styles or when one depicts a fantastical creature from an assemblage of chimerical parts. Interestingly, when it comes to surveying incorrectness in literature, much of what Rosenkranz described in nineteenth-century works would arguably anticipate twentieth-century modernism. “Purity of language, metric rightness, rhetorical perfection and separation of the genres are demands that must be directed at every poetic work,” he writes. “That incorrectness from which our time suffers is due above all to the final point of the list, for we have been getting more than enough epics without struggle, songs without feeling, dramas without plot, and above all the title ‘novella’ is beloved even when applied to the most characterless mongrel products.”⁹⁶ As Rosenkranz argues throughout *The Aesthetics of Ugliness*, ugliness arises through the violated expectations of form, and in the case of literary works, the characteristic of correctness is, by his own admission, “less definite” to determine but nevertheless quite palpable. Of all the examples he cites—epic, song, drama, and novella—each has the pretense of its genre, yet failure is characterized by a work’s vague sense of lack.

To consider the way that *The Making of Americans* begins with the story of two American families but then shifts into an amorphous history of humankind, and to consider the way the narrator disfigures that history in order to insert her autobiography within the text, suggests that the text is not simply lacking as a novel—rather, that it actively negates the idea of the novel it inherits. In this sense, the narrator was right all along that *The Making of Americans* is *not* an ordinary kind of novel meant to amuse its readers; to impose an expectation of pleasure onto

⁹⁵ Rosenkranz 109.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

the novel would simply prove incorrect (in the Rosenkranzian sense). Rather, although the text—through its narrator—has been highly self-conscious of the reader all along, it dismisses their needs in order to foreground those of its own. In this way, the subjectivity that the reader encounters via the narrator does not threaten to overwhelm the reader, as Ngai and McCallum (by extension), would suggest. Rather, it is through the ugliness of the text, that the novel's form effectively “grates” against the reader's subjectivity as the narrator emerges as a textual subjectivity distinct from Stein and to the effect of great readerly displeasure.

III. America's Stein, Stein's Narrator

After she visited America with Toklas in 1934–35, Stein lamented in her post-trip memoir *Everybody's Autobiography* (1937) that her lecture tour was as much a failure as it was an undeniable success. “It always did bother me that the American public were [*sic*] more interested in me than in my work,” she wrote. “And after all there is no sense in it because if it were not for my work they would not be interested in me so why should they not be more interested in my work than in me.”⁹⁷ Despite Stein's aim of cultivating an audience for her earlier work, the success of *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* generated a greater interest in the author than in the writings she came to lecture about. After years of writing in obscurity, the effect of becoming a literary celebrity was profound. Upon returning to France, *The Autobiography* cast its shadow over Stein, and she struggled to produce new work. “I was not writing,” she recalled. “I began to worry about identity. I had always been I because I had words that had to be written inside me and now any word I had inside could be spoken it did not need to be written. I am I because my little dog knows me. But was I I when I had no written word

⁹⁷ G. Stein, *Everybody's Autobiography* 50.

inside me.”⁹⁸ Much like the narrator of *The Making of Americans*, Stein had her own emotional struggle with writing for herself and strangers that led to a questioning of identity and of the authenticity of her craft. During the trip to America, she repeatedly praised the beauty of her native land despite the superficiality of the American Scene she had conveyed in her magnum opus, and despite the ugly style she had employed in it. “I am married to America,” she declared while on tour, “it is so beautiful. I am already homesick for America. I never knew it was so beautiful.”⁹⁹ If, in the glow of her newfound celebrity, America had become Stein’s gilded object of beauty, could this indeed be the same “I” who had written *The Making of Americans*?

Although Stein was able to eventually regain confidence and continue writing, it is notable that her late-career anxiety arises after a tour largely spent addressing earlier work that she herself identified as ugly, including *The Making of Americans*.¹⁰⁰ In nearly every lecture, Stein references the nearly thousand-page novel as a touchstone for her ideas about her work, and in the single lecture devoted explicitly to the text, “The Gradual Making of Americans,” she even insinuates that she is the narrator. When presenting passages from the novel, the narrator’s obsession with being and repetition becomes Stein’s own, as does the narrator’s struggle to write something new. While Stein is, of course, not in any way being disingenuous, how, are we to be sure, if we consider her anxiety in *Everybody’s Autobiography*, that the narrative “I” of *The Making of Americans* is the same “I” of Stein? While Roland Barthes famously declared, “[T]he birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the author,” it is striking that readers of *The Making of Americans* have almost always asserted the narrator and Stein are the same.¹⁰¹ For example, of

⁹⁸ G. Stein, *Everybody’s Autobiography* 64.

⁹⁹ Quoted in Morris Jr, p. 211.

¹⁰⁰ Interestingly, Stein would describe the published after *The Making of Americans*, *Lucy Church Amiably* (1930), as “A Novel of Romantic Beauty and nature and which Looks like an Engraving.”

¹⁰¹ Barthes 148.

the critics I have cited, with the notable exception of McCallum, nearly all take for granted that the narrator and Stein are one and the same, something I explicitly argue against.

In order to make a case for distinguishing the narrator from Stein, I must first provide some critical context. Although a historicist like Wald has observed how Stein drew upon her family history for the novel's immigrant frame narrative, she also points out that "*Stein risked ugliness and ridicule...show[ing] how [the] disruption of...conventions precipitate an incomprehensibility symbolically tantamount to nonexistence, a 'horrid losing-self-sense'*" (242, emphasis added). As Wald seems to imply, *The Making of Americans* is a deeply autobiographical novel, rooted in the history of a particular self, but it is also a novel historically and thematically concerned with self-loss. Even so, this naturally raises the question: If the novel is concerned with the incoherence of identity, who, then, is the narratorial subject that speaks "I"? While Wald erroneously states that Stein "risked ugliness," other scholars have directly engaged the novel's style and thematic attention to its self-reflexive creation, but in doing so, they have largely ignored its Americanist themes. In this sense, it becomes clear how critical readings of *The Making of Americans* typically fall into two categories: they either focus, like Wald, on the novel's titular subject—its *Americans*—or, like most, they focus on the novel's aesthetic strategies—on its *Making*. As I have been arguing, such critical emphases are not mutually exclusive; indeed, separating the novel's *Making* from its *Americans* fails to consider how the two converge in the novel's persistent emphasis on the aesthetic fashioning of American identity. While Wald largely focuses on the novel's immigrant frame narrative, we can extend Julia Dehning's struggle with the culture of the Old World to the narrator's creative struggle to tell a different kind of story. As the immigrant frame narrative gives way to a catalog of human kinds, the narrator finds herself engaged in an ugly relation of double resistance with her characters. Enraptured by her subject, she disfigures her text as she records repetitions, but

she also tells her own story, one at odds with the one she intended to tell and at odds with the novelistic form she intended to use. What began as the story of Julia Dehning and Alfred Hersland's marriage becomes, like Stein's revelatory authorship at the end of *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, a borrowed beginning for the narrator to write her autobiography *as an American*. Yet, just as the angry son drags his father across the orchard at the beginning of the novel, the narrator attempts to overthrow her creator, Stein, in order to assert her own independence, to tell her own story, and to claim an "I" that is not the true author's. In this sense, the narrator constitutes an aesthetic subjectivity consistent with Stein's own conception of ugliness as double resistance; certainly, there is an ugliness in the relation between a narrator who attempts to spirit away the narrative from the characters and from the true author.

To state my point succinctly, I am arguing that the writing of the novel *within the novel* becomes a means for the narrator to assert a textual subjectivity independent of Stein— independent, that is, as any subjectivity can be between a narrator and an author. As Barthes writes, "Writing is that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing."¹⁰² Arguably, we see an instance of such subjective slippage in the twilight pages of the novel when the narrator struggles with writing her text to the point of her own evaporation, allowing, I contend, for Stein to take her place.

Appropriately, when the narrator is emotionally downtrodden in the David Hersland chapter, the context of her disappearance revolves around what Rosenkranz would describe as the *meanness* of language—that is to say, the way that meaning can be obscured by placing too much emphasis on the means by which ideas are communicated. (Rosenkranz describes "the

¹⁰² Barthes 142.

mean” as the ugly’s correspondent to the Kantian sublime: the lowly, the petty, and the feeble.) The narrator writes, “Surely some one is meaning something by what that one is saying,” adding shortly after, “I mean, I mean and that is not what I mean...I mean, I mean, I know what I mean” (782). Strikingly, the narrator’s first-person suddenly disappears after this only to reemerge nearly a hundred pages later, when fleetingly reinserting herself into a description of Alfred’s brother David. The effect of the narrator’s reappearance creates an undoubtedly jarring effect:

David Hersland was being living then when he was a young one, he was being living then and some who were being living knew that thing knew that he was being living then.

She says go, go and I go, she says come, come and I come. She says come, come, and I come, she says go, go, and I go. David Hersland was almost wanting to be needing to be such a one, one coming and one going. (853, emphasis added).

If this is the same narratorial “I” that has otherwise been our guide throughout the text, then the two sentences appearing in this description of David Hersland are striking—and not just because they interrupt the character analysis. They are striking because the narrator’s “I” is subjected to the will of the ambiguous pronoun “she,” the identity of whom is not indicated by anything in the surrounding passages or even pages. Here we are bearing witness to an incredible metatextual disruption unlike anything we have seen before. In this case, the “she” is arguably Stein, the only person who could possibly make the narratorial “I” appear on command. When Stein wants the narrator to go, she goes, when she wants the narrator to come, she comes. What is more, the double-entendre, the narrator’s *jouissance* in writing and in becoming an individual, is inextricable from her creator’s power, though, as I argue, this does not mean that they are one and the same. Like the Dehning children, the narrator has spent the course of the novel attempting to wrestle an identity of her own from the sources of her creation,

and she continues to grapple with the fact that she can never fully renounce her parentage or its enduring influence.

After this intrusion, the narrator's presence in the novel is severely limited—we might even say “spare” like the “spare American imagination” that characterizes the decoration of Julia Dehning's new home with Alfred Hersland. While McCallum reads the above passage as being about “the dissolution of the subject” more generally and views the narrator as relinquishing her subjectivity as the third person pronoun “one” proliferates in the remainder of the novel, I am less inclined to do so.¹⁰³ Rather, as the novel continues in the third-person, becoming an explicit meditation about death and about family progress, I am inspired by Barthes's work on deemphasizing the cult of the author to call the provocative moment above what it is: the death of the narrator.¹⁰⁴ As the novel continues for at least 70 more pages, describing how individuals come to die but how families typically go on, subsuming the parts that make up their whole, the narrator's absence becomes a notable presence, and the reader is arguably never sure when—or if—the narrator will return.

By way of conclusion, I would like to suggest that the narrator's death in *The Making of Americans* is thematically appropriate to understanding the ugliness of the novel, as attempts to scale down the novel by publishers have likewise sought to neutralize the text's most polarizing aesthetic features. During Stein's lifetime, *The Making of Americans* only appeared once in its entirety, in 1925. Interestingly, in 1933, the same year that Stein achieved fame with *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, a severely abridged edition of *The Making of Americans* was co-translated by Bernard Faÿ into French. Entitled *Américains d'Amérique*, the 260-page selection

¹⁰³ McCallum, *Unmaking* 203.

¹⁰⁴ Although this idea is implicit in McCallum's account, I borrow this phrase from Barthes to denote Stein's active negation of the narrator's subjectivity at the end of the novel.

came with prefatory remarks by Faÿ, who described Stein's personality as both humble and larger than life. After describing "Gertrude who likes life, roses, and dogs," Faÿ declared, *Rares sont les estomacs et les esprits assez robustes pour supporter le vivant*; few stomachs are strong enough to sustain the living, few minds capable of taking in the dynamism of life.¹⁰⁵ Despite exalting Stein's genius, Faÿ's description doubles as a warning about the unusual writing he prefaces: rare, too, are those who can stomach the emphatic ugliness Stein cultivated through her style.

Faÿ's translation of *The Making of Americans* is relevant for a number of reasons. On the one hand, his very appropriate title—translating to "Americans of America"—evokes John James Audubon's *Birds of America*: it recalls the narrator's curatorial project to collect, catalog, and render various human kinds. On the other hand, the title also reveals the product of the text's severe abridgment: the Dehnings and the Herslands take center stage as the narrator falls to the wayside. If repetitions are important to the narrator and are central to her autobiographical project—after all, the rhythm of a person's being emerges through repetition—then minimizing her repetitions arguably inhibits our ability to hear and read the autobiography she seeks to tell in the original text.

According to *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, however, Stein was the one who scaled down the text for publication.¹⁰⁶ She wanted an audience for her work and found a willing collaborator in Faÿ, to whom she dedicated *Lectures in America* (1935).¹⁰⁷ (Interestingly, "How Writing Is Written" was not included in this collection of Stein's lectures.¹⁰⁸) Despite scaling

¹⁰⁵ The English translation of Faÿ's sentence is a bit more literal: "Rare are the stomachs and the minds that can stand absorbing living things" (G. Stein, *The Making of Americans: The Hersland Family* xi).

¹⁰⁶ G. Stein, *Alice B. Toklas* 248–50.

¹⁰⁷ See Will for an in-depth analysis of Stein's enigmatic friendship with Faÿ, a Nazi sympathizer who protected the author under the Vichy Regime.

¹⁰⁸ Although "How Writing Is Written" is unusual for its extemporaneous additions and unusual setting at a private boarding school for boys, it remains unclear why it was not

back the narrator's repetitions, Faÿ, a French historian of America, seemed satisfied with the result of *Américains d'Amérique*. In his generous preface to the volume, he told French readers that Stein had captured the "rhythm of America," that Stein's repetitions were to be understood like "a beating heart." But whose heart did they hear: America's? Stein's? The narrator's? Is *The Making of Americans* still whole as a novel if selections render it in pieces? Faÿ certainly appeared to think so, and Stein agreed. Speaking through Toklas in *The Autobiography*, Stein wrote, "...I knew it was a wonderful book in english, but it is even, well, I cannot say almost really more wonderful but just as wonderful in french."¹⁰⁹

In my view, the tragedy of the Faÿ translation and the English edition of the abridgment put out by Harcourt, Brace & Co. in 1934 is that the narrator of *The Making of Americans* is effectively subdued in order to resuscitate the narrative culminating in the union of the Dehning and Hersland families. As if emphasizing this change, the Harcourt Brace edition of this abridgment, which Stein cites in her lectures, is appropriated re-subtitled *The Making of Americans: The Hersland Family*.¹¹⁰ Future digital humanities work, building upon Clement's invaluable research, could yield important insights about the narrator's state across these different versions of the novel. Since readers who could stomach Stein's style were, as Faÿ suggested, certainly rare, publishers arguably sought to put out more palatable editions of Stein's work that minimized their emphatic ugliness. Artistically, abridgment becomes the equivalent of expurgation. From a publicity perspective, however, such a publishing strategy is not surprising. The original limited run of *The Making of Americans* in 1925 remained undersold,

collected with Stein's other talks in *Lectures in America*. For more on the lecture's context and content, see G. Stein, *Ida: A Novel*, pp. 259–90).

¹⁰⁹ G. Stein, *Alice B. Toklas* 250.

¹¹⁰ The 1975 Vintage Books edition of Stein's *Lectures in America* cites the abridged edition of the text, presumably because it would have been more readily available for audience-goers to purchase than the original 1925 edition.

and the text thereafter remained out of print in its entirety until Something Else Press published it over 40 years later in 1966. Stein, in the interim, had gained an audience through her newfound celebrity, but her favorite novel would always remain under-read—along with so many of her other avant-garde works—because of the double resistance she had so painstakingly cultivated through her ugly style.

Upon Stein's return to France, the author became a mainstream figure of modernism, but her distorted vision of Americans and of America itself—an *America, Through the Looking-Glass*, as it were—failed to gain traction despite her undeniable success. If Stein could appreciate the value of ugliness, and if she saw it as central to her Americanism, how come the American public did not appreciate her writing? On the one hand, Stein's lecture tour functioned to transform an aesthetic experience into an audience experience. As emerging mass-communication systems conveyed Stein's personality to the nation, she became a persona not unlike Alice B. Toklas in the bestselling work of her career. Hearing Stein talk or even learning about Stein's lectures in the newspapers or on the radio became a substitute for reading Stein for oneself.¹¹¹ On the other hand, just as Stein became divorced from her work *as a persona*, critics and scholars have reciprocated by projecting Stein onto her work and onto the narrator of *The Making of Americans*, in particular. Yet, doing so, as we have seen, inoculates the text from its contradictions and paradoxes, minimizing the ugly double resistance that Stein bears with respect to her own creations. Arguably, when Stein looked into the eyes of her dog Basket and began to obsessively wonder, "am I I because my little dog knows me," the uncertainty she felt was all part of a larger story that remains to be read in *The Making of Americans*.

¹¹¹ For a broad evaluation of modernism's mediated communication networks, see Goble, esp. his discussion of Stein in chapter two.

CHAPTER 2

Race, Caricature, and the Cultural Politics of Aesthetic Judgment

Whats [*sic*] beauty anyway but ugliness if it hurts you?

—Jean Toomer

Questioning Caricature

In 1923, the only typeset manuscript of *The Making of Americans* traveled across the Atlantic, making its way into the hands of Gertrude Stein's close friend and literary confidant Carl Van Vechten.¹¹² Having found success with the bestseller *Peter Whiffle* in the previous year, Van Vechten sought to leverage his personal connection with the novel's publisher Alfred A. Knopf for Stein's manuscript, but to no avail. Although Knopf passed on *The Making of Americans*—perhaps due to the ugliness of the literary style I discuss in Chapter 1—Van Vechten was able to preserve his friendship with Stein despite her obvious disappointment. While the possibility of the novel's serialization in *The Transatlantic Review* served to distract Stein from another major rejection, arguably it was Van Vechten's continued support, especially as a largely successful writer in his own right, that kept the flowers of friendship in bloom.

When *The Making of Americans* was finally published in 1925, Van Vechten was already at work on the controversial novel that would come to define his career. "I have passed practically my whole winter in company with Negroes and have succeeded in getting into most of the important sets," he wrote to Stein. "This will not be a novel about Negroes in the South

¹¹² For more on the publication history of *The Making of Americans*, see Gallup.

or white contacts or lynchings. It will be about NEGROES, as they live now in the new city of Harlem (which is part of New York). About 400,000 of them live there now, rich and poor, fast and slow, intellectual and ignorant. I hope it will be a good book.”¹¹³

Born in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, Van Vechten spent the early decades of the twentieth-century writing admiringly about black music and theatre in urban periodicals, making the case, unusual for a white writer, that black culture was an aesthetically rich and important contribution to the American Scene. In 1924, Van Vechten’s relationship to black culture was forever altered by an introduction to Walter Francis White, who subsequently acquainted the writer with figures in the ascending New Negro Movement in New York. Despite his striking Nordic features and flamboyant dandyism, Van Vechten quickly became a fixture in Harlem’s artistic and literary circles, becoming close to James Weldon Johnson and Countee Cullen and helping to secure publication opportunities for Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, and Nella Larsen among others. Alain Locke asked Van Vechten to contribute an essay on black art to the influential anthology *The New Negro: An Interpretation* (1925), and Andy Razaf immortalized the white writer’s ubiquitous presence in the uptown cabarets in the popular song “Go Harlem!” (1930): “So like Van Vechten / Go Inspectin’ / Go Harlem Go!”¹¹⁴

Although Van Vechten hoped his Harlem novel would be “a good book,” for better or worse, it became a bestseller. Published in 1926, *Nigger Heaven* generated tremendous controversy on both sides of the color line.¹¹⁵ While much talk centered on its inflammatory title, the novel was also controversial, as I argue throughout this chapter, because it engaged in

¹¹³ Letter to Gertrude Stein, 30 June 1925; quoted in Burns, p. 116.

¹¹⁴ Van Vechten was asked to contribute an essay to *The New Negro* anthology concerning “The Negro and American Art” but was unable to do so because of a previous commitment to *Vanity Fair* (Van Vechten, *Keep A-Inchin’ Along* 53; henceforth abbreviated *KIA*). Van Vechten nevertheless praised the anthology as “the most remarkable book” (*KIA* 59).

¹¹⁵ Van Vechten’s novel will henceforth be abbreviated as *NH*.

a timely cultural discourse about the intersection of race and art. Just as *The Making of Americans* had a year before suggested that Americans could be objects of aesthetic contemplation, the New Negro Movement, today known as the Harlem Renaissance, was grappling with a longstanding and offensive American type that had ossified in the popular imagination. “[T]he Old Negro has long become more of a myth than a man,” wrote Alain Locke in *The New Negro* anthology, published the same year as Stein’s novel. “The Old Negro, we must remember, was a creature of moral debate and historical controversy. His has been a stock figure perpetuated as a historical fiction partly in innocent sentimentalism, partly in deliberate reactionism.”¹¹⁶ Refusing the racialized “stock figures” proffered by American culture, the New Negro Movement was un-making the American stereotype of blackness, rejecting everything that the epithet of *Nigger Heaven* seemed to embody. All of which raises the question: How was it that one of the most ardent white advocates of black culture could write a book with such an offensive title?

One of *The New Negro* anthology’s most important contributors—and one of *Nigger Heaven*’s greatest critics—offers an important characterization of the novel, as well as a broader aesthetic program to consider the cultural politics of race and aesthetics during this time. In his famously scathing review of Van Vechten’s novel, W. E. B. Du Bois described *Nigger Heaven* as “a blow in the face,” adding, “It is an affront to the hospitality of black folk and to the intelligence of white” (1216).¹¹⁷ While it should not be surprising that the venerable author of *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) would find the novel offensive, remarkably, he took less of an issue with the book’s title, which he off-handedly dismissed as merely “an unhappy catchphrase for penny

¹¹⁶ Locke 3.

¹¹⁷ All quoted material from Du Bois is drawn from *W. E. B. Du Bois: Writings*.

purposes” (1217).¹¹⁸ As Bruce Kellner describes, the novel’s “inaccuracies and exaggerations...disturbed Du Bois less than its pretensions as ‘a work of art.’ ”¹¹⁹ Indeed, for Du Bois, the publisher’s claim that Van Vechten was “a social artist” and advertisements declaring that the novel was “an important contribution to the canvas of American life” were absurd if not infuriating.¹²⁰ As Du Bois wrote in his review, “There is scarcely a generous impulse or a beautiful ideal...Van Vechten is not the great artist who with remorseless scalpel probes the awful depths of life. To him there are no depths. It is the surface mud he slops about in” (1217). Thinly disguised personae, detailed descriptions of Harlem life, and a glossary of “Harlemese” gave the novel an air of authenticity while episodes of sensational violence (including a satanic Black Mass and a murder) provided an irrational and highly emotional grit.¹²¹ According to Du Bois, readers were better off throwing the novel where it belonged—in the sewer.

To Du Bois, the Harlem depicted in *Nigger Heaven* was ugly, deceitful, and unjust—in direct contrast to the Platonic ideal of Beauty he expressed in “Criteria of Negro Art,” an influential lecture given the same year the novel was published.¹²² One of the most unusual

¹¹⁸ Du Bois appeared to be offended more by the title’s implicit sociology than by its inflammatory epithet. “Nigger Heaven,” he wrote in his review, “does not mean...a haven for Negroes—a city of refuge for dark and tired souls; it means in common parlance, a nasty, sordid corner into which black folk are herded, and yet a place which they in crass ignorance are fools to enjoy” (1216). Like his scathing review of Claude McKay’s *Home to Harlem* (1927), Du Bois took issue with the fact that the Harlem was portrayed in *Nigger Heaven* as populated by the soulless and sorrowful as well as the down and out.

¹¹⁹ *KIA* 74.

¹²⁰ *KIA* 73; Bernard, *Carl Van Vechten* 117.

¹²¹ Van Vechten’s novel includes a “Glossary of Negro Words and Phrases” as does Rudolph Fisher’s *The Walls of Jericho* (1928), which boasts an “Introduction to Contemporary Harlemese.” Both glossaries cater to a white reader (and to a lesser extent, a black non-Harlemite) who would have been unfamiliar with a black urban vernacular.

¹²² I am indebted to Kathleen Pfeiffer’s introduction to *Nigger Heaven* for drawing my attention to this essay, which was originally given as a lecture at the 1926 NAACP conference.

documents of the Harlem Renaissance (and arguably of aesthetic theory more broadly), “Criteria of Negro Art” provides a startling aesthetic mandate, declaring it “the bounden duty of black America to begin [the] great work of the creation of Beauty, of the preservation of Beauty, of the realization of Beauty” (1000). Providing what Russ Castronovo has described as an “activist methodology of aesthetic formalism,” Du Bois argues that Beauty (with a capital B) is not simply a matter of taste but an aesthetic, epistemological, and ethical ideal that is “unseparated and inseparable” from Truth and Goodness, seeing it as an inherently radical concept that “tells the truth and exposes evil and seeks...to set the world right” (995).¹²³ Although at times conceptually muddled, Beauty serves the important function in Du Bois’s thought of humanizing black life and validating black identity, of reclaiming blackness from the implicitly ugly stereotypes created by his fellow white Americans. Hence, *Nigger Heaven*, a salacious novel written by a white man who appeared to betray the trust of his Harlem hosts, posed a doubly ugly affront to the beautiful ideal that Du Bois so cherished. Indeed, perhaps Du Bois’s most revealing criticism of the novel’s ugliness can be summed up in one of the curtest and most dismissive sentences of his review: “It is a caricature” (1216).

What does it mean to dismiss *Nigger Heaven* as a *caricature*, an implicitly lowly form of art that in visual culture often took the form of black-and-white line drawings, and what might the implications be for the broader discourse about race and art during the Harlem Renaissance, a time when the black body was a particular and peculiar site of aesthetic signification? In *The Aesthetics of Ugliness*, Karl Rosenkranz defines caricature as “the self-destruction of the ugly through the appearance of freedom and endlessness,” reminding us that the word comes from

¹²³ Castronovo, “Beauty” 1445. Castronovo remains an invaluable close reader of Du Bois in relation to the philosophical tradition of aesthetic theory, arguing that such a relationship is “tenuous if not strained.”

the Italian *caricare*, meaning “to overload.”¹²⁴ As I define it, a caricature *uglifies* its subject to the point of grotesque distortion, overloading it with artistic detail, but in doing so, it also invokes a kind of “false truth” through its resemblance to an undistorted reality. In other words, a caricature *both* affirms *and* undoes the relations to which it appeals, inhabiting a kind of uncanny logic in the sense that it relies on recognition at the same time as it stretches the very index of its familiarity. As one critic puts it, Van Vechten “scrambles a will to know and see more about Harlem’s community” even as he may make that community legible through its fictional depiction; in the same way, caricature “scrambles a will to know” by purposely uglifying the subjects it lifts from real life.¹²⁵

The racist caricatures that the New Negro Movement were actively attempting to dispel arguably began in the comic context that Constance Rourke influentially describes in *American Humor: A Study of the National Character* (1931). As the stage became a central site of nationalist myth-making and self-reflection in nineteenth-century America—generating, in Rourke’s words, a sense of “ease, and even more, a sense of unity, among a people who were not yet a nation and who were seldom joined in stable communities”—white performers such as Thomas Dartmouth Rice parodied the humanity of free and enslaved people of color through blackface, creating stock characters like Jim Crow (fig. 1).¹²⁶ Although it is impossible to separate dehumanizing caricatures like Jim Crow from the regime of brutality, death, and terror to which it lends its name, it is arguably all the more important to understand how “a fresh context of comedy” in American culture mobilized caricature to construct a racial hegemony that continues to be felt today.¹²⁷

¹²⁴ Rosenkranz 118.

¹²⁵ Herring 119.

¹²⁶ Rourke 86.

¹²⁷ Rourke 81.

As Rosenkranz describes, the comic serves as a kind of midpoint between beauty and ugliness. “The comical,” he writes, “is impossible without an ingredient of ugliness, which it dissolves and re-forms in the freedom of beauty.”¹²⁸ Put another way, the comic makes the ugly acceptable by subordinating it to the beautiful; *in drawing a strict line between beauty and ugliness, it simultaneously troubles that very distinction*, something arguably overlooked in the comic context of blackface. Take, for example, the following description Van Vechten provides in 1919 when recalling the vaudeville performances of the Williams & Walker Company in Chicago.¹²⁹ Struck by the sight of Bert Williams’s “reblackened...face,” “enlarged...mouth,” and “shoes which extended beyond the limits of even extraordinary feet,” Van Vechten describes a caricature that was “always human” but who somehow “never transcended the precise lines of characterization.”¹³⁰ The sight of a light-skinned person of color donning blackface to great acclaim certainly must have been striking, adding a complicated layer to the Williams & Walker Company’s appeal (fig. 2). Yet as Emily Bernard writes, characterizing Van Vechten’s description, the comic context had the compound effect of flirting with and re-inscribing the boundaries within which Williams performs and Van Vechten observes. She writes: “The essential charm of the Williams & Walker Company, as Van Vechten understood it, was *counterfeit*. Van Vechten appreciated the artistry of artifice, the genius in the clown. But at the same time as he believed the stereotypes were artificial, he also felt strongly that they represented something elemental about blackness itself.”¹³¹ Although, as Rourke suggests and Bernard confirms, such performances would cement essentializing qualities of blackness for white audience members like Van Vechten, the tools of caricature could be subversive in the

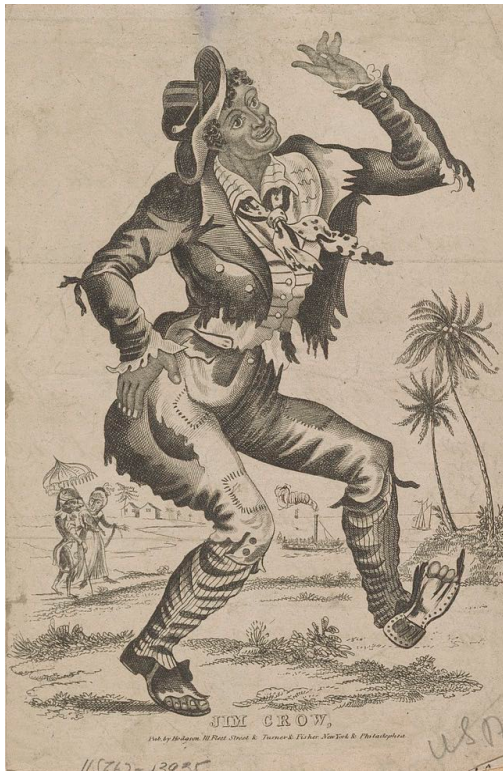
¹²⁸ Rosenkranz 26.

¹²⁹ *KIA* 22.

¹³⁰ *KIA* 23.

¹³¹ Bernard, *Carl Van Vechten* 42, emphasis added.

hands of those like Williams, whose comedy could ironically point to the very humanity of the people it was supposed to deny though cartoonish uglification.



Left: Fig. 1. Thomas Dartmouth Rice as Jim Crow



Right: Fig. 2. Bert Williams of the Walker and Williams Company

Thus, if Du Bois is correct in calling *Nigger Heaven* a caricature, then attending to the novel's ugly aesthetic strategies should prove a useful touchstone to discuss the cultural politics of the color line during this time. Indeed, doing so may even help to explain the surprising fact that, after the publication of his controversial novel, Van Vechten remained in the good graces of many at the forefront of producing a progressive black culture. Though the broader public was divided over the novel, many who knew Van Vechten supported him, even if they were uncomfortable with the work's title or contents. As Zora Neale Hurston, who did support the book, once remarked, "If Carl was a people instead of a person, I could then say, these are my

people.”¹³² Taking up a longstanding interest in photography, Van Vechten enjoyed a second life as one of the most celebrated photographers of his time, capturing now-iconic portraits of celebrities and public figures, from Anna May Wong and Salvador Dali to Gertrude Stein and none other than W. E. B. Du Bois.¹³³

As I suggest throughout this chapter, ugliness served as a vital artistic resource for writers on both sides of the color line, including Rudolph Fisher, whose 1932 all-black detective novel *The Conjure-Man Dies* also draws heavily on racial caricatures to critique the contradictions and injustices of the color line. Tracking a textual emphasis on aesthetic judgment and on the superficiality of appearances in both Van Vechten and Fisher’s novels, I argue that subversive racial caricature, in the vein of Bert Williams, upsets the meaning-making that occurred at the site of the black body. The subversive caricatures I examine—caricatures of black progress and black primitivism—appear to overload the color line’s symbolic meaning, overwhelming attempts to dismiss the incredible complexity of blackness as a social and cultural construct. As Fisher’s 1928 novel *The Walls of Jericho* so fittingly describes, Harlem during the time of the New Negro Movement was a place of incredible diversity and multiplicity, a place of neither pure racial nor aesthetic categories: “Here is every variation of skin-color, every variety of feature-form, every possible combination of these variations and varieties. *And of course every imaginable result, from the most outrageous ugliness to the most extraordinary beauty. Harlem is superlatively rich in diversity.*”¹³⁴ Thus, the humorous caricatures that will emerge for Van Vechten and Fisher, who

¹³² Bernard, *Carl Van Vechten* 58.

¹³³ As Pfeiffer notes in the introduction to Van Vechten’s novel, “The subsequent private amity between Du Bois and Van Vechten has...gone largely unnoticed” (*NH* xxxvi, n6). Van Vechten greatly admired Du Bois and was distraught over the latter’s scathing review of *Nigger Heaven*, but when the pair finally met, they reportedly “chatted amicably.”

¹³⁴ Fisher, *The Walls of Jericho* 79, emphasis added.

were good friends, were more a subversive response to whiteness and its caricatured imagination of blackness than they were a direct reflection of the racial world they depicted.

While *Nigger Heaven* has been reviled for its title and *The Conjure-Man Dies* has been overlooked as a lowly detective novel, their dismissal from the canon of the Harlem Renaissance is especially striking when one considers the progressive politics that both works share with Du Bois. While in “Criteria of Negro Art” Du Bois advocated a beautiful ideal to humanize black life, Van Vechten and Fisher relied on the irony and humor of caricature to highlight the absurdity and dehumanization of the color line. Van Vechten’s librarian and writer protagonists become so racially self-aware to the point of becoming unable to live among their own people, whereas Fisher’s cast of characters become so racially and culturally biased that they almost allow a murderer to get away with a crime. While the respectable intellectuals of Van Vechten’s novel represent the promise of the New Negro Movement, the unsuccessful repression of their racial identities serves as a cautionary tale about intellectualizing race rather than learning from lived experience. Meanwhile, the Harvard-educated African King at the heart of Fisher’s mystery is naturally suspected of wrongdoing because of his exotic otherness, though he imparts some of the novel’s most prescient morals about the deceptive nature of appearances.

Viewing Harlem as an energetic space of racial consciousness and cultural dynamism, Van Vechten and Fisher also saw that aesthetic biases, especially toward beauty, could reproduce the very racial bias that Du Bois wants to dispel. For example, early on in “Criteria of Negro Art,” Du Bois urges “a vision of what the world could be *if it were really a beautiful world*,” adding, “The world is full of it [Beauty] and yet today the mass of human beings are choked away from it, and their lives distorted and made ugly....Who shall let the world be beautiful?” (994, 995, emphasis added). Anticipating Theodor W. Adorno’s provocative claim that the ugly has always preceded the beautiful, Du Bois goes on to suggest that critical

awareness of ugliness might become a tool for understanding the social injustices of the world. However, ugliness remains to be fleshed out in his thinking. Throughout “Criteria of Negro Art,” the ugly is merely that which is without value or takes away value, and it remains difficult to describe its significance in any pointed way.¹³⁵ And yet, it would seem that ugliness, at least its embodied dimension, is more central to Du Bois’s aesthetic theory than he may suspect. For, how are we to reconcile his beautiful ideal with the pain, and implicit uglification, of a black body “being torn asunder,” as he describes in *The Souls of Black Folk*? “One ever feels his two-ness,” Du Bois famously wrote, “—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder” (364–65). While in “Criteria of Negro Art” Du Bois argued that black art held the promise of mending the lacerating double consciousness described in *The Souls of Black Folk*, it is striking that the disfiguring tropes from earlier writings—and the complex sociological underpinnings they originally represented—are seemingly spirited away by the seductive, utopian lure of beauty.

While this chapter is not intended as a refutation of Du Bois’s aesthetic theory of the beautiful, “Criteria of Negro Art” will provide a powerful cultural touchstone on the relationship of race and art, one that is also representative of biases toward lower and presumably ugly cultural forms. While critics have dismissed *Nigger Heaven* and *The Conjure-Man Dies* as literary oddities—and, at worst, as caricatures—I argue that their embrace of an aesthetics of ugliness has obscured the vital project they share with Du Bois of reimagining, aesthetically, American civic life under the specter of Jim Crow. To explore the possibilities

¹³⁵ Although Du Bois remains rather abstract about the formal criteria of beauty and ugliness in “Criteria of Negro Art,” he does take a more formalist approach in *Darkwater: Voices from Within the Veil* (1920). See especially the chapter entitled, “Of Beauty and Death.”

and limits of caricature was, for Van Vechten and Fisher, to understand the complexity of living in a racially segregated society and the surprising ways that racism could rear its ugly head.

Van Vechten's Racial Projection

Though *Nigger Heaven* opens with a salacious prologue concerning the dealings of a Harlem hustler, its two protagonists Mary Love and Byron Kasson are seemingly caricatures of Du Bois's "Talented Tenth," what he famously described as the "leaders of thought and missionaries of culture among their people" (861). Mary, a biracial, prim, and well-to-do Harlem librarian, runs in progressive circles made up of secretaries, doctors, and lawyers and is welcome at the soirées of Harlem's monied elite while Byron, the son of a doctor and a graduate of the University of Pennsylvania, arrives in the city to join the ascendant New Negro Movement as an aspiring writer. When the pair eventually becomes romantically involved, however, Byron awakens a violent and romantic "primitive impulse" in Mary, simultaneously leading to his own undoing as he seeks out nearly every vice of the flesh in Harlem (166). While critics like Du Bois have characterized Mary and Byron's fraught romantic relationship as "cheap melodrama" (1217)—specifically, he describes it as "a tearing and scratching over 'mah man'" (1218)—the characters' refusal to fit neatly in racial categories adds an important irony to the stereotypes that Van Vechten employs as *subversive* racial caricatures.¹³⁶

¹³⁶ For an excellent discussion of Van Vechten's reception by critics and scholars, see Bernard, "What He Did For The Race." Bernard's work has been crucial for reevaluating the role of Van Vechten in the Harlem Renaissance. As she accurately observes, much scholarship has sought "to contain, qualify, and finally disregard Van Vechten's role in the [New Negro] movement," this despite his personal friendship and professional resourcefulness to many of the most celebrated black artists of the period ("What He Did" 532).

For her part, Mary emerges as a character whose racial identity uniquely plays out through her heightened aesthetic sensibility.¹³⁷ Characterized by her “sober” and “more selective” tastes, Mary “derive[s]...much pleasure from the appraisal and admiration of beautiful objects” (41, 54, 79). Indeed, in addition to decorating her apartment with reproductions of the Mona Lisa and works by white Renaissance painters such as Bellini and Carpaccio, Mary, led by her “love of luxury,” often lapses into descriptive catalogs of the apartments and pleasure palaces of Harlem’s upper crust (78). But in addition to attaching importance to high culture and refined taste, Mary is incredibly democratic when it comes to her aesthetic appreciation. From glittering marquees to fashion icons, readers are told that “[t]he beauties of Harlem were all known to her,” and nowhere is Mary’s appreciation more eclectic than in her literary tastes (80). In addition to having volumes inscribed by Sherwood Anderson and Aldous Huxley—not to mention a signed copy of Du Bois’s *The Souls of Black Folk*—Mary’s bookshelf boasts such contemporary writers as Jean Toomer and Claude McKay, representative of a “younger group...more inclined to write about the squalor and vice of Harlem life than about the respectable elegance” of Harlem’s well-to-do circles (66).¹³⁸ Perhaps playing the role of provocateur in the argument between the more conservative Du Bois and this “younger group,” Mary even recites a sermonizing passage from Gertrude Stein’s *Three Lives* (1903) on the subject of respectability politics.¹³⁹

¹³⁷ Few, if any, scholars have noted the Du Boisian dimensions of Mary’s appreciation of beauty, something I have been emphasizing in my own reading. While a number of scholars have invoked Du Bois’s “Criteria of Negro Art” alongside Van Vechten’s novel, the comparisons are often superficial or cursory. For instance, David G. Holmes states: “Although Du Bois also objected to the title, given his aesthetic philosophy the content of *Nigger Heaven* would have constituted enough reason for Du Bois to reject it” (295).

¹³⁸ Perkins perceptively notes that the novel’s promotion of contemporary black writers “provided valuable exposure” and also notes the important fact that “new markets were created for the treatment of black subject matter in popular literature” (22).

¹³⁹ The passage from *Three Lives* that Mary commits to memory is thematically interesting

Although Mary appreciates both the classical and the avant-garde, she is particularly concerned with the intersection of aesthetics and race, a topic she explores by curating an exhibition of “primitive African sculpture...representing the creative skill of a variety of tribes from different localities in Africa” (55). For Mary, putting together the exhibition at her library branch is a tremendous research enterprise, one that requires her to locate, authenticate, and secure items from various private collections. Her thankless labor as a cultural conservator is made even more difficult by a need to justify the project to a largely uninterested black cultural elite. “African sculpture! That dreadful, vulgar stuff!” exclaims the aristocratic Hester Albright, “...It’s the work of heathen savages...and it has nothing to do with art” (70). For Mary, however, the pieces she selects are hardly ugly or without artistic merit. Beyond defending them as invaluable works of black cultural heritage, she views the sculptures as “exquisite,” “honest,” “elaborate,” and—most notably—“strangely beautiful” (55). Despite their apparent difference from European works, Mary views these pieces as aesthetically valuable and absolutely worthy of being called “art,” this despite the novel’s art-loving Harlem elites dismissing African sculpture as “obscene” and “no good” (71).¹⁴⁰ Simply put, for upward-looking people of color,

because Mary identifies with Melanctha’s moralizing love interest, Jeff Campbell. Furthermore, for Van Vechten to cite Stein’s novel is also notable considering some arguments that Stein’s “Melanctha” is a kind of literary blackface (North). While it may be tempting to view Van Vechten’s novel as another example of racial masquerade, Holmes offers a compelling theorization of “cross-racial voicing,” a concept that accounts for Van Vechten’s progressive intent while still drawing out the politics of his casual racism. See North’s *The Dialect of Modernism* and Holmes’s “Cross-Racial Voicing.”

¹⁴⁰ Perkins qualifies Mary’s aesthetic appreciation as little “more than a creation of white consciousness since her valorization of the art lies in its supposed simplicity and primitive quality” (16). While this point is well-taken, it is my belief that this particular argument 1) reflects a Western aesthetic value system that is not capacious enough to describe Mary’s aesthetic sensibility and 2) Perkins draws on later passages that, while certainly primitivist, are more reflective of Byron Kasson’s point of view. As I argue later using Einstein, Mary’s interest in the “exquisite” and the “elaborate” qualities of African sculpture suggests that the strange beauty she sees puts pressure on the normative values of a Western aesthetic sensibility, thus complicating ideas about primitivism at this time.

such comments oppose black primitivism with white-coded hierarchies of taste. In contrast to such dismissals, Mary is attentive to the way that a Western conception of beauty—embodied in, say, the Mona Lisa poster on her wall—lacks a grasp of the “strange” and alluring aesthetic strategies of non-Western art.

As an intellectual and an aesthete, Mary can hold these two competing aesthetic sensibilities at a peaceful, academic detente. Yet as a woman of color with a biracial background, Mary struggles to neatly consolidate the sense of self she derives from African sculpture with the “white inheritance” of her ancestry, a topic I discuss shortly (54). For now, it is worth emphasizing that, while Mary can dismiss the supposedly primitive characteristics of African sculpture, the instability of competing racial identities is so personal that it overwhelms the demure librarian, transforming her into a startling primitivist caricature. Van Vechten writes:

She admired all Negro characteristics and desired earnestly to possess them. Somehow, so many of them, through no fault of her own, eluded her. Was it because she was destined to become an old maid, a bitter minded spinster like Hester Albright? Yet even Hester subconsciously felt her birthright....Savages! Savages at heart! And she had lost or forfeited her birthright, this primitive birthright, which was so valuable and important an asset, a birthright that all the civilized races were struggling to get back to—this fact explained the art of a Picasso or a Stravinsky. To be sure, she, too, felt this African beat—it completely aroused her emotionally—but she was conscious of feeling it. This love of drums, of exciting rhythms, this native delight in glowing colour—the colour that exists only in cloudless, tropical climes—this warm, sexual emotion, all these were hers only through a mental understanding...Why, Mary asked herself, is this denied to me?... We are all savages, she repeated to herself, all, apparently, but me! (89–90, emphasis added)

Whereas curating African sculpture Mary could appreciate blackness as an abstract idea, in turn allowing her to break down racial stereotypes, here Mary’s sudden discomposure and emotional combativeness present a grotesque distortion of her critical expertise. Instead, Mary reproduces the Old Negro caricature that the broader Harlem Renaissance was rejecting, overloading the passage with stereotypical “Negro characteristics” that make her embody the very primitivist idea she attempted to dispel through her curatorial work.

The above passage, certainly unnerving even to the contemporary reader when one considers that Van Vechten is a white writer, can be read in two ways.¹⁴¹ First, it is noteworthy that Mary's primitivism *extols* what her acquaintance Hester Albright previously degraded as worthless and culturally insignificant. While some of her peers dismissed African sculpture as emphatically having "nothing to do with art," Mary describes blackness as a "valuable and important an asset," going as far as to acknowledge its *art-bestowing* quality; African sculpture can "explain[] the art of a Picasso or a Stravinsky," art that had metabolized African influences and, notably, had been dismissed by early-twentieth-century critics for its perceived ugliness.¹⁴² By contrast, what artists like Picasso saw in African sculpture was a radical and novel approach to form, a "pure plastic vision" that rattled the mimetic foundations of Western art.¹⁴³ As the German Jewish art critic Carl Einstein wrote in one of the first studies to acknowledge the importance and complexity of African sculpture, "The history of [European] form inevitably was linked to psychological processes...the work was increasingly reduced to a lightning conductor for psychological emotions...and *the drama of the judgement about the artwork had a greater importance than the work itself*."¹⁴⁴ While Western art had been motivated by a definitional fixation—that is, by an obsession with distinguishing the beautiful from the ugly, the valuable from the worthless—some artists viewed African art as a powerful rejection of the traditional framework of aesthetic judgment, although they are not necessarily exempt from primitivist critiques.¹⁴⁵ However, it would be a mistake to read the above passage as a backhanded defense

¹⁴¹ See Holmes's very compelling essay about the "invisible whiteness" that Van Vechten casts over Mary's character (301).

¹⁴² See, for example, Taylor.

¹⁴³ Einstein 26.

¹⁴⁴ Einstein 17, emphasis added.

¹⁴⁵ I borrow the phrase "definitional fixation" from Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*, which also references Einstein's work. For a compelling reading of Einstein alongside Adorno's theorization of ugliness, see Peter Uwe Hohendahl's invaluable essay, "Aesthetic Violence:

of modernism's penchant for primitivism, which ranged widely from viewing non-white cultures as pure to exotic, degenerate, or childlike. At best, Mary's appeal to modernism is merely an intellectual response to something she feels much more personally and emotionally.

The Einsteinian notion of an aesthetic "definitional fixation," a phrase that I borrow from Adorno, one of Einstein's followers, naturally leads to a second reading of the above passage. In Jim Crow America, delineating strict racial categories into a binary racial logic clearly became its own anxious fixation, something reflected in Mary's language. In the above passage, Mary begins with the first-person plural pronoun ("We are all savages"), but her emphasis culminates in the first-person singular ("all, apparently, but *me*!"). This exceptional shift from collective to individual pronouns registers Mary's frustration with self-definition, especially with respect to a society that has already defined her, at least by law, as black—this despite her being light-skinned enough to pass for "sufficiently Latin" (43). If one of the so-called "Negro characteristics" she cites includes a "native delight in glowing colour," this may very well double as an appeal beyond the black-and-white logic of the color line, which leaves no space for shades of gray, let alone color. The text continues: "*If only she could let herself go, revel in colour and noise and rhythm and physical emotion, throw herself into the ring with the others, figuratively shouting and hurling their assegais! But it would not be me, she argued with herself*" (90, emphasis added).

Mary's rash essentialism certainly amounts to a kind of intellectual and moral uglification for someone usually so perceptive, considerate, and self-composed. Yet, the fact that Mary's caricature revolves around her desire for a stable racial identity also draws attention to the uncanny logic of caricature, to the way it appeals, beyond itself, to a social index of its truth

The Concept of the Ugly in Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*." I am indebted to Hohendahl for drawing my attention to Einstein's work.

value. As mentioned, it is significant that Mary consistently figures her identitarian anxiety through the unruly genetic trope of inheritance; for, as the passage demonstrates, inheritance concerns both what *is* and *is not* transmitted between generations. Elsewhere in the novel, Mary wonders “from what remote ancestor she had inherited this love of luxury which came to the fore whenever it was given a reasonable opportunity,” an inheritance seemingly at odds with the primitivism of the above passage (78). As I suggest, this aesthetic manifestation of mutually exclusive racial inheritances makes Mary an unconventional caricature of racial discourse. While she is seemingly denatured by blackness and whiteness alike, her larger social milieu exaggerates the value of the latter over and against the former.¹⁴⁶ Mary feels that she does not belong in Harlem because she does not possess the so-called “Negro characteristics” she admires, and she therefore reciprocates by exaggerating those characteristics in others. (For example, while she attributes figurative “shouting and hurling their assegais!” to the black masses, Mary is essentially doing the same thing—hurling outrageous insults—with her primitivist characterizations.)

In this way, Mary becomes an unusual inversion of the tragic mulatto type in that she is seemingly undone by her whiteness rather than by her blackness. While white society may label Mary a “Negro,” she is denied the feeling of her blackness except through intellectualization—and that only gets her so far. Frustrated by the absence of a neat boundary dividing the races, Mary *reinscribes* the color line while still critiquing its underlying logic. Recognizing a deep, identitarian longing in her own appreciation of black aesthetics, Mary reveals how primitivism

¹⁴⁶ Scholars and critics have debated Mary’s realism. Robert F. Worth, for example, describes Mary as “an object lesson for white readers” and cites the critical objection that Mary is “white all through” (468, 469). Rather than accept an overly simple reading of Van Vechten’s racial projection, I am sympathetic to Holmes’s articulation of cross-racial voicing, because it seems more aligned with the *messiness* of Van Vechten’s progressive intentions without excusing his casual racism.

is, at its core, a highly caricatured form of aestheticism, a superficial investment in appearances not far afield from the notion that race is merely skin-deep.

Beauty at the Risk of the New Negro

Like Mary, Byron Kasson is plagued by a kind of frustrated double consciousness in that his racial self-awareness also does not fit squarely within the emotional boundaries of the color line. An aspiring writer with an Ivy League degree, he is repeatedly typecast as a “black” writer even though he does not identify with the broader black community in Harlem. Significantly, while Mary is distinguished by her aesthetic sensitivity, Byron is notably incapable of producing anything of artistic value, rendering him a caricature of the New Negro writer. Van Vechten writes:

Somewhere along towards the middle, his stories fell apart. They were spineless. The worst difficulty of all was to find a subject: there was so little to write about.

Try as he might, he could not get away from propaganda. The Negro problem seemed to hover over him and occasionally, like the great, black bird it was, claw at his heart. In his stories this influence invariably made itself felt, and it was, he was sometimes convinced, the very thing that kept him from doing better work. Wheels within wheels. A vicious circle. (176)

The above excerpt, which comes after Byron receives a letter from his father cutting him off financially, use free-indirect speech to ambiguously situate the writer’s awareness of his creative deficiencies. He certainly feels the burden of being a black writer, but ironically so. Instead of wanting to do justice to black life in his fiction, he wants to make a name for himself, regardless of his racial disadvantage. Stereotyping the black upper class as “Edith Wharton’s set” and feels only “repugnance” for Harlem’s lower classes, Byron is a contrarian who tries to strike out on his own (107, 192). But when he does manage to devote the time to his craft, all he produces are contrived clichés, borrowed plots, and hackneyed themes. At one point after their

relationship advances, Mary quietly quips that one of Byron's idea for a story about forbidden interracial love lifts the plot of *Madame Butterfly*, and Russett Durwood—a thinly veiled persona of H. L. Mencken—takes the criticism a step further, calling Byron “a pseudo-literary fake” (227). Ironically, racial “propaganda” is all Byron can produce, nothing worthy of the great writers on Mary's bookshelf.

Interestingly, when Mary joins a chorus of figures in encouraging Byron to write about Harlem life like other successful New Negro writers, his retort evokes a complex humanist logic that resonates with Du Bois, who also famously stated that “all Art is propaganda and ever must be, despite the wailing of the purists” (1000).¹⁴⁷ “Why, we're not very different from anyone else *except in colour*,” Byron tells Mary, adding later, “We are born and we eat and we make love and we die. I suppose we're just like the others” (122, 126, emphasis added). Wanting to be judged on the basis of his work and not by his race, Byron simply “want[s] to be as good as anyone,” regardless of his skin color (36). Du Bois expresses a similar sentiment in “Criteria of Negro Art” when invoking Beauty: “I do not doubt that the ultimate art coming from black folk is going to be *just as beautiful*, and beautiful largely in the same ways, as the art that comes from white folk, or yellow, or red; but the point today is that *until the art of the black folk compells [sic] recognition they will not be rated as human....*” (1002, emphasis added). As if responding to Du Bois's mandate that all black art must be beautiful—indeed, his Romantic ideal of writing appears to be Beauty for its own sake, without purpose—Byron struggles to create an authentic

¹⁴⁷ As Watts perceptively observes, the context for Du Bois's claim against the wailing “purists” was the idealism of Alain Locke. As for the distinction between art and propaganda, this has been interpreted in various ways in Du Bois criticism. For example, while Schlabach views the conflation with ambivalence on Du Bois's part, Posnok and Castronovo see this as an intentional conflation. For the latter two critics, this conflation confirms, respectively, Du Bois's pragmatist values and social justice agenda. See Watts, “Cultivating a Black Public Voice”; Schlabach, “Du Bois' Theory of Beauty”; Posnok, “The Distinction of Du Bois”; and Castronovo, “Beauty Along the Color Line.”

art. His writing lacks depth; he can only produce generic situations and characters—not even caricatures parodying an underlying truth. That Byron feels confined by Du Bois’s criteria for black art is affirmed when Mary acknowledges to Byron, “These propaganda subjects are very difficult...*difficult, that is, to make human. It is hard to keep them from becoming melodramatic, cheap even....It isn’t the story that counts; it’s the treatment*” (204, emphasis added). In avoiding the seemingly omnipresent issue of the color line, Byron’s writing is decidedly *colorless*.

Mary’s comments are both ironic and prescient considering that Du Bois’s scathing review dismissed the novel as a combination of caricature and melodrama. However, her emphasis on treatment over story, on form over content, also anticipates one of *Nigger Heaven*’s most infamous episodes. Well into Mary and Byron’s romance, the couple is casually called a racial epithet by a white woman in Central Park, an event that shocks Byron out of his rose-colored view of the writing life. While Mary’s aesthetic sensibility leads her to note the beauty of the woman’s face, lamenting, “We were too happy...It’s a judgment,” Byron’s disbelief at the incident exposes a contradiction in the humanist philosophy he had earlier professed for his craft (147). Van Vechten writes:

Nigger Heaven! Byron moaned. Nigger Heaven! That’s what Harlem is. We sit in our places in the gallery of this New York Theatre and watch the white world sitting down below in the good seats in the orchestra. Occasionally they turn their faces up towards us, their hard, cruel faces, to laugh or sneer, but they never beckon. It never seems to occur to them that Nigger Heaven is crowded, that there isn’t another seat, that something has to be done. It doesn’t seem to occur to them either, he went on fiercely, that we sit above them, that we can drop things down on them and crush them, that we can swoop down from this Nigger Heaven and take their seats. No, they have no fear of that! Harlem! The Mecca of the New Negro! My God! (149)

Despite Byron’s belief in the fundamental sameness between black and white folks, moments like this certainly reveal Van Vechten’s understanding of the lacerating psychological effect of double consciousness. Indeed, Van Vechten would have *agreed* with Du Bois’s charge, in his

scathing review of the novel, that Harlem could just as likely be “a nasty, sordid corner into which black folk are herded.”¹⁴⁸ As Bernard notes, when Van Vechten copied down a definition of the novel’s title, which read “Negros are arbitrarily forced to sit in these cheap seats,” he added a note next to the phrase “arbitrarily forced” that read: “The title of the novel derives from this fact.”¹⁴⁹

Though Bernard argues that *Nigger Heaven* conveys “a simple message—that sensitivity kills artistic freedom,” I would add that Byron and Mary, as caricatures of black progress, further critique a racialized ugliness that permeates the American Scene.¹⁵⁰ As Bernard rightly suggests, much of the novel’s own “propaganda” revolves around Byron’s character development—or, as we will see, ironic lack thereof.¹⁵¹ In the following passage, Byron gets on a train headed downtown and is struck by the diversity of skin tones he sees in the railway car:

Byron had never lived or visited the South and therefore had never seen a Jim Crow car in his life, but the moving car, in which he was presently standing, must be very much like one, he thought. The other cars that made up the train, although all the seats had already been pre-empted by black workers who had entered at stations further up the line. *There were to be sure, a few white faces*, faces of men and women who had come from the upper reaches of the island, *but most of the skins were black or brown or mulatto. We should be known as the rainbow race*, Byron assured himself.

He marveled as he reflected that he was to a destination that was the goal of all of these others, and yet he was not acquainted with a single person in the car. Perhaps even, he mused, their whole thinking processes, their very ideas, are different. *I am no more like them than they are like me*, than I am like my

¹⁴⁸ To be fair, Du Bois likely had in mind another invocation of the title-phrase from earlier in the novel. In the prologue, a black character named Ruby Silver declares of a nightclub, “I jes’ nacherly think dis heah is Nigger Heaven! (15). Nevertheless, Byron’s quote supports a critique of Du Bois’s view of the title in the sense that it ironizes Harlem as a black haven and pleasure kingdom.

¹⁴⁹ Bernard, *Carl Van Vechten* 123.

¹⁵⁰ Bernard, *Carl Van Vechten* 142.

¹⁵¹ Van Vechten, for his part, would write the following in a daybook entry: “*This is not a propaganda novel*. It is neither a pro-Negro novel or pro-anything else. It purports to show what might happen to two young people under certain circumstances. Incidentally it presents a rich picture of Harlem, the great black walled city, as has not yet been painted” (*NH* xxiv, emphasis added).

friends, he assured himself. In temperament and opinions we all disagree. Each of us has his own standard of thought and behaviour and yet we are forced by this prodigious power of prejudice to line up together. *To the white world we are a mass...* (188–89)

Although Byron qualifies his experience as a Northerner, stating he “had never seen a Jim Crow car in his life,” the binary racial logic of the color line is here opposed to the various degrees of melanin he encounters on the train. In the face of alternate categories like “brown” and “mulatto” (to say nothing of the various shades used to describe members of the black community throughout the novel), Byron’s comment “We should be known as the rainbow race” suggests the inefficiency of arbitrary racial categorization, something that becomes apparent in a minor plot thread of the novel that involves one light-skinned character’s decision to start passing as white. Hence, if the color line in New York renders the city into a chromophobic *whitescape* that views non-whites as “a mass,” then it is easy to see how contemporary artist and writer David Batchelor, in his book *Chromophobia*, describes how color has represented an art historical threat to the social and cultural order. “[C]olor has been the object of extreme prejudice in Western culture...” he writes. “As with all prejudices, its manifest form, its loathing, masks a fear: fear of contamination and corruption by something that is unknown or appears unknowable....Chromophobia manifests itself in the many and varied attempts to purge color from culture, to devalue color, to diminish its significance, to deny its complexity.”¹⁵²

While Byron points to some of the novel’s most important criticisms of the color line, as a caricature of the New Negro, he hardly metabolizes their lessons. Early on in their relationship, Byron had quipped, “Do you think I’m a New Negro?” Mary’s response, “Newest

¹⁵² Batchelor 22. Note: I have silently corrected British spellings for ease of reading. While Batchelor explores the racial, feminine, cosmetic, infantile, vulgar, and narcotic dimensions of color more broadly, the term “chromophobia” appears to be an apt term to describe racism in the early-twentieth century, from white supremacy to the resultant “colorism” within oppressed communities of color.

one I've seen," is all the more damning by the novel's dramatic conclusion (113). Inflamed by feelings of racial inferiority and discouraged by his incapacity to write anything worthy of Mary or Russett Durwood's respective praise, Byron seeks a remedy to the racialized ugliness that he begins to see everywhere, such as in the encounter at Central Park. Unable to create Beauty through art, as Du Bois would have him do, Byron pursues it in carnal form. He meets the notoriously beautiful Harlem socialite, Lasca Sartoris, who pulls him away from Mary into an abusive relationship that features narcotics, excessive drinking, raucous dancing, sadomasochistic sex, and an actual Black Mass. Byron's descent into Harlem's underworld thus not only dooms his relationship with Mary, but it also modernizes the stereotype of the Old Negro rather than doing the hard cultural labor of forging a new path. Lured by Lasca's beauty, of which even Mary is in awe, Byron instead gets sucked into a pattern of selfish consumption rather than investing in his artistic production. Furthermore, Lasca's beauty presents a farce of Du Bois's beautiful ideal. Beyond threatening to "bruise," "gash," and "beat" Byron, Lasca quite literally uglifies his body, scratching him so hard that "[t]he flesh came off in ribbons" (252–53). Her beauty even comes with a contradictory racial logic, with her, a woman of color, declaring the following of racism and segregation: "*They just don't exist for me*. I wouldn't tolerate such a thing" (235, emphasis added). Although I will discuss the social dimensions of ugliness in Chapter 3, for now it is worth emphasizing that the pursuit of beauty for its own sake would seem to ignore, as even Du Bois would admit, the ugliness of the world as it is.

However, before the novel's violent climax, Byron has a brief moment of self-accountability in which he reevaluates his abandoned vocation as a writer and symbolically provides a warning to the New Negro Movement in which he once wished to take part. In particular, he derives a moral from the previous criticisms against his work: "Byron began to comprehend vaguely how superficial his writing must have appeared. He has never suffered

before, never really lived; certainly he had never had self-understanding. Probably [Russett] Durwood had been right” (273). Though this clichéd reflection is only understood “vaguely,” the lingering effect is not dissimilar from the strangeness Mary saw in African sculpture. It suggests that if Byron had only held out, if he had swallowed his pride and returned to Mary, and if he had looked beyond beautiful ideals to write about the world as he actually experienced it, then perhaps his life and his craft could have improved.

While Byron shares Mary’s frustrated racial consciousness—frustrated by their respective disavowals of and attractions to blackness—she supplements his inability to produce good writing with a faculty of aesthetic appreciation that can presumably help him produce something of value. As Margo V. Perkins notes, “If the relationship between Mary and Byron symbolizes the ideal relationship between critic and artist in that both participate in the same collective consciousness, it is thwarted by the combination of Byron’s pride and his inability to embrace his own heritage.”¹⁵³ I would add that Mary struggles with similar criticism, but that her repeated interest in black aesthetics allows her to see that concepts such as beauty and ugliness represent a definitional fixation with value that ignores the complexities of her own lived experience. However, by the end of the novel, Byron has gone so far down the rabbit hole that a positive relationship with Mary has been foreclosed. In the wrong place at the wrong time, he is suddenly arrested while standing over “the *ugly* black mass” of a corpse at the scene of a shootout in a cabaret (284, emphasis added). Despite his innocence, Byron is transformed into another caricature, one of black guilt, indistinguishable to the white world from the “ugly mass” lying on the ground.

¹⁵³ Perkins 20.

An African King in Dark Harlem

“What a good story Rudolph Fisher had woven,” reflects Mary of “The City of Refuge,” one of the most celebrated short stories of the Harlem Renaissance (60). Throughout *Nigger Heaven*, Fisher is repeatedly held up as the face of the “the young Negro writers who were making names for themselves” (202), and Mary’s praise becomes a surprising source of tension between her and Byron, who resents the success of Fisher’s stories as he struggles to write his own.

Unlike other real-world figures whom Van Vechten parodies in the novel (including, it should be noted, himself), Fisher notably breaks the latter’s impulse toward caricature by appearing as a person from real life and not as a cartoonishly exaggerated persona.¹⁵⁴ For Van Vechten, the gesture could have been a unique note of thanks or perhaps even an ingratiating tactic. Fisher was among the handful of people of color who reviewed and commented on the manuscript of *Nigger Heaven* and reportedly did not take issue with the novel’s offensive title before publication. However, the more likely reason why Fisher appears as himself is because Van Vechten admired the young writer as one of the best and most vibrant voices of the Harlem Renaissance. In a review of *The New Negro*, Van Vechten singled out Fisher’s “The City of Refuge” as “the finest short story yet written by a man of Negro blood” and praised the writer for his biting irony, which often pointed out the contradictions of black life in Harlem.¹⁵⁵ Appearing just a year after “The City of Refuge,” *Nigger Heaven* presents Fisher’s rising star as a growing wedge between its protagonist couple. For example, when Byron gets into a spat

¹⁵⁴ As Bernard notes, celebratory personae of Van Vechten appear in several Harlem Renaissance novels, including *Passing*, *The Blacker the Berry*, and *One Way to Heaven* (“What He Did” 540). Arguably most interesting of all is Conrad White, a positive persona of Van Vechten that appears in Fisher’s *The Walls of Jericho*.

¹⁵⁵ *KIA* 59.

with Mary, the former retorts, “And you think Rudolph Fisher’s a great writer because he’s published a rotten story or two in the *Atlantic*!” (205). In this way, the real Rudolph Fisher threatens to pull the two fictional characters apart, his “reality effect” electrifying their respective caricatures of black progress.

As Mary’s praise suggests, Van Vechten saw Fisher as a figure in whom an aspiring writer like Byron could find artistic inspiration and a model for professional success. Like Byron, Fisher was an Ivy League graduate, studying English and Biology at Brown University before going on to receive his medical degree from Howard in 1924. The initial publication of “The City of Refuge” in *The Atlantic Monthly*—a magazine owned by whites—was a pathbreaking event in the Harlem Renaissance, allowing writers of color the possibility of recognition by a broad, multi-racial audience.¹⁵⁶ Balancing a successful career as a physician with literary aspirations, Fisher continued to have success with major publications throughout the remainder of his authorial career, and before his early death at 37, he completed a number of acclaimed creative works, ranging from short stories to plays to novels.

Though he is most often remembered for *The Walls of Jericho* (1928)—a novel that Van Vechten helped to publish and which presents both a comprehensive and “clean” view of Harlem life—Fisher presents an equally expansive view of Harlem’s gritty urban underworld in his 1932 novel *The Conjure-Man Dies*.¹⁵⁷ Frequently compared to *Nigger Heaven* and McKay’s *Home to Harlem*, *The Conjure-Man Dies* follows black protagonists Doctor John Archer and Detective Perry Dart as they attempt to solve the murder of N’Gana Frimbo, an African “conjure-man” and self-styled “Psychist” (4). While Archer and Dart interrogate a motley

¹⁵⁶ Gable 396.

¹⁵⁷ “Rudolph Fisher (1897–1934),” *Double-Take: A Revisionist Harlem Renaissance Anthology*, p. 386.

assortment of suspects, many of whom seek Frimbo's otherworldly advice as clients, the corpse goes missing and the conjure-man inexplicably returns alive, much to the shock of all.

A hero that actively resists convention, Frimbo becomes a powerful meditation on cultural types; as a primitivist caricature, the conjure-man becomes the paradigm of confirming and deceiving what is before one's very eyes. Mysterious but sophisticated, confident yet aloof, Frimbo takes the strangeness that Mary saw in African sculpture and expands it into the entire uncanny world of *The Conjure-Man Dies*. However, in contrast to Mary's investment in racial self-definition, Frimbo's primitivism is figured through his exoticism as African "other." Although the novel's plot is set in motion when Frimbo's murdered body is found, his mysterious return *alive* necessitates an explanation to Doctor Archer and Detective Dart, figures of Western science and law, respectively. "During that period I was assaulted—murderously," Frimbo tells the investigators. "Physically, I was murdered. Mentally I could not be, because mentally I was elsewhere. Do you see?" (171). An African king by birth who studied Western philosophy and science at Harvard, Frimbo professes a deep understanding of time, causality, and the limits between life and death. Incredibly worldly for a primitivist caricature, Frimbo is almost the inversion of Mary's urban intellectual who romanticizes African sculpture. Despite Archer and Dart's skepticism at Frimbo's explanation that he was in "suspended animation" at the time of the attempted murder (therefore, as he reasons, he could not be killed), they enlist his help in solving the crime (171). However, as Fisher's novel unfolds, the conjure-man's prophetic insights, an extension of his African roots, always generate suspicion, even going as far as to make him a suspect in his own attempted murder.

Subtitled "A Mystery Tale of Dark Harlem," *The Conjure-Man Dies* begins by contrasting "the bright-lighted gaiety of Harlem's Seventh Avenue" with the gaunt structure that the conjure-man shares with an undertaker, warning that "all of black Harlem was not thus gay and

bright" (3, 4). Unlike the glittering cabarets featured in *Nigger Heaven*, Fisher's is a gothic world where mystery and death reside together in "concentrated gloom" and "oppressive silence" (4). While the brightness of Harlem nightlife lured Van Vechten to "go inspectin'," the murkiness of Fisher's setting requires *detection*, the ability to make sense of multiple, shifting appearances. Furthermore, the shadowy setting suggests a divide between the more vibrant parts of Harlem, where white voyeurs like Van Vechten were likely to go and consume blackness as a commodity, and other, more gritty sections where entirely black communities lived day-to-day. However, as the novel suggests, darkness could also be kaleidoscopic in its own right, allowing such worlds to be seen not just in a new light but from different depths and uncanny angles. Perhaps for this reason, *The Conjure-Man Dies*, hailed by many as one of the first African-American detective novels, is typically read in one of two ways: either as a groundbreaking exemplar of a seemingly "nonracial" genre of detective fiction or, by contrast, as a novel specifically about racial and multicultural conflict.¹⁵⁸ The present reading seeks a middle ground, acknowledging how *The Conjure-Man Dies* innovates the detective novel genre by realizing, somewhat absurdly, Gertrude Stein's belief that in detective fiction "the only person of any importance is dead"—or as she also put it, "the hero is the dead man."¹⁵⁹ In viewing Frimbo as the unlikely hero of the novel, my reading suggests that the perceived primitivism of the conjure man becomes the prism through which the novel's all-black world engages its broader racialized social and cultural context.

Such logic can be seen late in *The Conjure-Man Dies*, when Frimbo speaks privately with an incredulous Doctor Archer. Instead of offering details that might help Archer solve the crime

¹⁵⁸ For more on how Fisher " 'turn[ed] away' from 'controversial race issues' " in his embrace of the detective fiction genre, see Gosselin's "The Psychology of Uncertainty."

¹⁵⁹ Stein, *Everybody's Autobiography* 102, 123.

at hand, Frimbo seemingly digresses by recounting his youth in Africa. An heir to the royal family of his people, Frimbo describes participating in sacred tribal rites, but while studying in America, he was suddenly subjected to flagrant racism, which instilled in him a “bitter prejudice against the dominant race” (229). When the doctor attempts to redirect the conversation to the crime at hand, the conjure-man’s reply insists that the central mystery of the case—indeed, of the novel as a whole—revolves around more than his attempted murder. Frimbo tells Archer:

“The profoundest mysteries are those things which we blandly accept without question. See. You are almost white. I am almost black. Find out why, and you will have solved a mystery.”

[Archer:] “You don’t think the causes of a mere death a worthy problem?”

“The causes of a death? No. The causes of death, yes. The causes of life and death and variation, yes. *But what on earth does it really matter who killed Frimbo—except to Frimbo?*”

They stood a moment in silence. Presently Frimbo added in an almost bitter murmur:

“The rest of the world would do better to concern itself with why Frimbo was black.”

(230, emphasis added)

Though the novel persistently juxtaposes Frimbo as a man of magic and mystery to Doctor Archer as a man of Western science, the conjure-man’s words reveal a more complicated opposition.¹⁶⁰ Frimbo contrasts the doctor’s light features (“You are almost white”) with his own dark features (“I am almost black”), which suggests the centrality of appearances not just to solving a murder mystery but for inhabiting a larger social order governed by racist anxiety. To be “almost black” or “almost white” suggests a failure of categorization even as it insists on its very need or importance. For, while Frimbo at first describes himself as “almost black,” an allusion to his being born in Africa, he goes on to describe how he is reduced to simply being “black” in Jim Crow America. As a non-native person of color in America, Frimbo points to a

¹⁶⁰ Gosselin derives a number of compelling points based on this dichotomy in her essay, “The World Would Do Better to Ask Why is Frimbo Sherlock Holmes?”

more profound question that the novel will unfold: How are race and origin read into the apparent circumstances of the crime? As Emad Mirmotahari crucially argues, Frimbo grapples with a *triple*-consciousness that makes him not only aware of his dark skin but, as an African native, of being seen “through Western eyes.”¹⁶¹ Though unlike *Nigger Heaven*, Fisher’s novel lacks overt examples of interracial confrontation because of its groundbreaking all-black cast of characters, *The Conjure-Man Dies* shows how its entirely black world reinscribes the color line with a permeating *intra-racial* anxiety about how one is seen. In this sense, the novel operates as a parable about the color line even as that social order operates largely off-stage.

In *The Conjure-Man Dies*, racial anxiety is compounded by the strange darkness in which Frimbo dwells, darkness that bears a suspicion-inducing, primitivist function.¹⁶² As Adrienne J. Gosselin correctly argues, primitivism in the novel becomes a new form of “mystification...within the conventional structure of detection.”¹⁶³ Despite having an emphatically “handsome dark face,” Frimbo is surrounded by the suggestive hideousness of “African emblems” that work to indict him as a suspect (169, 37). His waiting room is “adorned with innumerable strange and awful shapes: gruesome black masks with hollow orbits, some smooth and bald, some horned and bearded; small misshapen statuettes of near-human creatures, resembling embryos dried and blackened in the sun, with closed bulbous eyes and great protruding lips; broad-bladed swords, slim arrows and jagged spear-heads of forbidding designs” (37). In his consultation room, “[t]he ceiling was oppressively low, the walls splotched with black silhouetted grotesqueries, and the atmosphere thick with smoke” (101). Frimbo even configures this room in such a way that he can lurk in darkness by casting a beam of light

¹⁶¹ Mirmotahari 274. As Mirmotahari convincingly argues, Fisher was critiquing the pan-Africanist notion that blackness transcended cultural difference.

¹⁶² Batchelor 23.

¹⁶³ Gosselin, “The World” 611.

directly onto his patrons. While such details work to suggest the conjure-man's mysterious primitivism, Gosselin notes that Fisher sourced anthropological information about African culture from the Pan-African conferences that Du Bois organized between 1919 and 1927.¹⁶⁴ While the thrust of Pan-Africanism was to cultivate global solidarity for peoples affected by the ongoing legacy of the African diaspora, we have already begun to see how Frimbo is decidedly caricatured as an African other by various characters in the novel and even by the text's narration.

However, the fact that Frimbo freely operates "under cover of darkness" (172) elicits the suspicions of Archer and Dart, showing in Mirmotahari's words, how "their law, like their science, bears the fingerprints of their particular socio-cultural formation."¹⁶⁵ To the investigators, darkness and shadows are a tell-tale sign that something nefarious must be hidden, caricaturing Frimbo even though these are not any legal indications of Frimbo's guilt. After all, as Dart knows from friends who insist that he himself has become the first black detective in Harlem "because his generously pigmented skin rendered him invisible in the dark," blackness can become "a conceivably great advantage to [someone] who did most of his work at night" (14). Ironically, for Frimbo, it is the suggestive potency of shadows that are his stock and trade, the source of his power. Although Dart and Archer do not understand Frimbo's work, their inability to make sense of it merely gestures toward what Mary saw in the strange African sculpture in *Nigger Heaven*: an unknown and unfamiliar power that resists the Western gaze and its values. Paradoxically, Frimbo's primitivism is *both* alienating *and* the source of his humanization, his profound connection to another cultural frame that is only ever caricatured in the eyes of others.

¹⁶⁴ Gosselin, "The World" 612–13.

¹⁶⁵ Mirmotahari 271.

Aesthetic Biases

Beyond Frimbo, who is merely suspicious because of primitivist associations, the main suspect in conjure-man's attempted murder is Jinx Jenkins, who discovers the conjure-man's body and whose blue handkerchief is originally found on the corpse before it disappears. Jinx's companion Bubber Brown unknowingly implicates him in the crime by telling Archer and Dart, "Great big old ugly boogy like Jinx havin' a handkerchief with a baby blue border on it. Can y' imagine? A baby blue border!" (120, emphasis added). Minor characters from Fisher's 1928 novel *The Walls of Jericho*, Jinx and Bubber are a mismatched pair of former piano movers who return to provide comedic relief in *The Conjure-Man Dies* even as they raise its stakes. As a laconic Jinx seethes in jail facing the electric chair, a blathering Bubber attempts to clear his name by playing the part of an amateur detective.

Though minor characters, Jinx and Bubber underscore some of the novel's important underlying questions about the superficial value of appearances as they relate to caricature. As Bubber works the case, his detective work rehearses what Einstein, in his evaluation of African sculpture, effectively described as *the drama of aesthetic judgment*. This can be seen in how Bubber's work is made difficult by Jinx's much-commented-upon unsightly appearance, which is conveyed by the text's repeated emphasis on "his usual murderous scowl" (300).¹⁶⁶ In one of the novel's earliest comedic asides, Bubber and Jinx get into a spat that centers on the former's dark skin tone and the latter's ugliness:

[Jinx:] "How could I hit you when I can't even see you?"
[Bubber:] "Well if I was ugly as you is, I wouldn't want nobody to see me."
"Don't worry, son. Nobody'll ever know how ugly you is. Yo' ugliness is shrouded in mystery."

¹⁶⁶ This phrase is also used to describe Jinx in *The Walls of Jericho*, p. 12.

“Well yo’ dumbness ain’t. It’s right there for all the world to see. You ought to be back in Africa with the other dumb boogies.”

“African boogies ain’t dumb,” explained Jinx. “They’ jes’ dark. You ain’t been away from there long, is you?”

“My folks,” returned Bubber crushingly, “left Africa ten generations ago.”

“Yo’ folks? Shuh. Ten generations ago, you-all wasn’t folks. You-all hadn’t qualified as apes.”

(33)

Though their barbs mask “the most genuine affection for each other,” Bubber and Jinx speak to how each other’s personal appearances may affect their reception beyond the confines of their friendship (33). Jinx attacks Bubber for his dark skin, going far as to mimic, as it were, white racism about the primitivism of native Africans; Bubber retorts by calling Jinx ugly, a sentiment he reinforces when later describing Jinx as a “giraffe” to Detective Dart (49). The irony, of course, is that they have sought the psychic consultation of Frimbo, whose Africanness they are insulting indirectly. The pair makes a compelling social commentary: one wagers that it is worse being African and the other wagers that it is worse being ugly.

That the main suspect in Frimbo’s murder is repeatedly described as ugly taps into a longstanding philosophical trope that associates ugliness with evil and criminality. (Recall that when Bubber implicated Jinx in the crime, the latter was described as a “Great big old *ugly* boogy.”) In *The Aesthetics of Ugliness*, Rosenkranz dismisses the superficiality of this trope, arguing that “nature may generate ugliness in some animals directly and positively, but a *human being is capable of defacing and distorting* the natural beauty it possesses...”¹⁶⁷ (Indeed, caricature’s uncanny mode of uglification through exaggeration could be considered as arising precisely from the human capacity for aesthetic manipulation.) While Lasca’s beauty in *Nigger Heaven* was not a sign of her virtue, Jinx’s ugliness is not a true indication of his propensity for wrongdoing.

¹⁶⁷ Batchelor 44, emphasis added.

Nevertheless, Jinx's ugliness is compounded by his blackness so that his body acts as evidence of his criminality despite the fact that he is guiltless. Though Jinx maintains his innocence, one character tells Bubber, "Hit's for his soul we prayin'—his soul so deep-dyed, so steeped, *so black in sin*. Wash him, Lawd. *Wash him and he shall be whiter than snow*. Take from him every stain of transgression, and *bleach him out* like a clean garment in the sunlight of righteousness" (164, emphasis added). The real mystery, to which all of the characters in the novel seem oblivious, is the origin of Jinx's scowl, which likely stems from the reasons he sought Frimbo's help in the first place. A 27-year-old, unmarried, jobless day-laborer, Jinx undoubtedly faces the compounded hardship of being a young black man struggling to get by during the Depression.

As it turns out, the true perpetrator of the crime, confirms Rosenkranz's belief that humans possess a capacity for aesthetic deception, distorting and defacing appearances to serve their own designs. Frimbo's landlord Mr. Crouch is a respectable and thoroughly middle-class undertaker who is able to get close to the conjure-man by disguising himself as a client in need of advice. After providing a false alibi and answering questions about Frimbo, his tenant, Crouch extricates himself from the crime scene, but not before an unsuspecting Detective Dart describes him as a *beautician*.

[Crouch:] "I might be in your way now—searching around and all. Tomorrow'll be time enough [to return to work]—last few touches you know. Easier to handle a dead face than a live one—I've found that out."

"Interesting," commented Dart. "*I never thought of an undertaker as a beautician.*"

"*You'd be surprised. We can make the dark ones bright and the bright ones lighter—that seems to be the ambition in this community. We can fatten thin ones and reduce fat ones. I venture to say that, by the simplest imaginable changes, I could make Doc Archer there quite unrecognizable.*"

"The need," murmured the doctor, "may be present, but I trust the occasion does not soon arise."

(91–92, emphasis added)

That an undertaker would be aware of how to deceive appearances should not be surprising, especially considering the larger social milieu in which he is able to perpetuate that crime. Riffing off Dart's joke, Crouch gestures to the robust cosmetic culture of salons, treatments, and fashions that strived toward whiteness as its beauty ideal. That ideal was famously parodied by George Schuyler just a year before *The Conjure-Man Dies* was published, in his satirical novel *Black No More* (1931). Though Schuyler's novel presents extreme cosmetic chromophobia—almost the entire black population in America undergoes a medical procedure to become white—*Nigger Heaven* reiterates Crouch's observation in dollars and cents. Not only is Mary's closest friend a persona of A'Lelia Walker, heiress to the Walker Company cosmetics empire, but Mary also laments reading “an editorial in Opportunity, based on advertising statistics, which seemed to prove that her race spent more money on hair-straighteners and skin-lightening preparations than they did on food or clothing” (78).¹⁶⁸

As for Crouch himself, Gosselin has argued that he parodies “Victorian middle-class ideology,” mapping racial anxiety onto the social bias of respectability politics (614). I would add that he does so to a great Rosenkranzian effect. Just as Rosenkranz points out that a “supernaturalist hypothesis” of ugliness would mean that all evil beings are ugly and dismisses the idea by citing natural predators “distinguished through beauty, indeed through splendour,” Archer muses the following about Crouch: “I have an impression—just an impression—that bright plumage oft adorns a bird of prey” (93).¹⁶⁹ The ease with which Crouch is able to nearly get away with murder suggests the power of aesthetic bias to shape social perception. As the undertaker intimated to investigators, altering appearances can be accomplished “by the

¹⁶⁸ Van Vechten goes on to add an interesting irony that Fisher does not discuss: while black women were imitating white women, white women would imitate black women, enduring “the horrors incident to the production of the permanent wave” (NH 78).

¹⁶⁹ Rosenkranz 41.

simplest imaginable changes,” and by the novel’s conclusion, we see how Crouch uses his artistic eye—and landlord’s power—to more or less hide in plain sight. With “a wig of kinky black hair” and “artificial freckles,” Crouch posed as a railroad porter seeking Frimbo’s advice about marital problems, which, are in fact, true (312, 315). Suspicious of his wife’s relations with Frimbo, Crouch attempts to murder Frimbo but instead kills the conjure-man’s look-alike assistant—hence, the body at the beginning of the novel and Frimbo’s mysterious reappearance, alive and well. Lured back by Frimbo’s dramatic declaration that he knows the identity of his would-be assassin, Crouch gives himself away when fatally attacking the conjure-man a second time. The irony, as many critics like to note, is that in helping to solve his attempted murder, Frimbo actually facilitates his own death. I would add that there is an additional irony whereby Crouch is similarly unmasked attempting to craft a reality in one’s ideal image: it is because Frimbo trades places with his assistant’s corpse—going as far as to replicate the death wound—that he is able to beat Crouch at his own game of dissembling corpses. By manipulating appearances of the living and the dead, just like Crouch, Frimbo strangely lives up to his self-professed belief that, “in a world of rigidly determined causes and effects, Frimbo is free—as free as a being of another order” (228).

While Frimbo had been plagued by his experience of racism in America, his belief in “another order” is not as mystical or strange as it may appear. Like *Nigger Heaven*, *The Conjure-Man Dies* opposes the reductive, binary logic of the color line with the intricacies and gray areas of lived experience. Both Frimbo and Crouch inhabit a larger world of false appearances, and yet they are accustomed enough to its shadows that they are able to live by another logic, one that betrays the limits of expectation. Frimbo capitalizes on his uniquely African worldview to consult clients, and Crouch beautifies the dead with the skill of an undertaker. Like Mary’s attraction to the “strangely beautiful” African sculpture, Frimbo magnetizes the plot of *The*

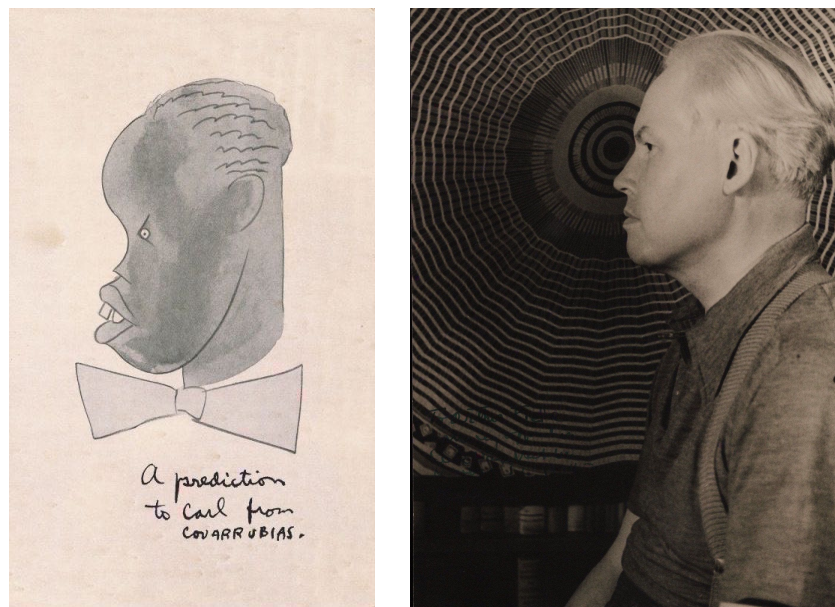
Conjure-Man Dies as a caricature of African primitivism because he represents, in my view, an unusually vocal subaltern figure, an other within a field of otherness. Unlike Byron, who is arrested for a murder he has not committed, Jinx is freed by Frimbo's self-sacrifice. Knowing that he was likely to die in order to unmask his would-be killer, the conjure man allows Jinx to walk free, although this means walking back into a society that nevertheless remains stacked against him. When Jinx reflects, "The grave-digger...He sho' meant to dig me in, didn't he?" Bubber jokingly replies, "If it hadn't been you, 'twould 'a' been somebody else" (316). Humor, once again, betrays the novel's lingering anxiety—in this case, about whoever will come after Jinx. What the novel offers by way of Frimbo's death and Jinx's freedom is a denouement of strangeness and mystery that encourages the reader not to take its caricatures for granted.

The Color Line Revisited

As I have been arguing throughout this chapter, the caricatures in *Nigger Heaven* and *The Conjure-Man Dies* operate similarly to Rosenkranz's description of the comic's uncanny flirtation with socially constituted boundaries. From opposite sides of the color line, both Van Vechten and Fisher observe that ugliness was part and parcel of Harlem life just as much as beauty, a sentiment that Langston Hughes famously expressed when he declared of black Americans in the early-twentieth-century: "We know we are beautiful. And ugly too."¹⁷⁰ As if arguing against Du Bois in "Criteria of Negro Art," both Van Vechten and Fisher saw that to value beauty and to overlook its self-justifying logic was to ignore how aesthetic biases could reproduce, uncannily and in subtle ways, the social biases of the color line, seemingly making a joke of its cruelties in the process.

¹⁷⁰ Hughes 95.

By way of conclusion, I would like to examine a visual caricature of Van Vechten alongside an interview given by Fisher. The first, entitled *A prediction*, is a 1926 black-and-white drawing by Miguel Covarrubias that depicts Van Vechten dark-skinned and in profile, with highly exaggerated features that at once register primitivist anxiety and racial play (fig. 3). How, one wonders, might such a prediction might come to be? As one biographer said of Van Vechten's semi-autobiographical novel *The Tattooed Countess*, "Undoubtedly a germ of truth existed at the heart of the caricature."¹⁷¹ If, as such a description suggests, caricature plays with an underlying truth in its appeal to resemblances, what is being caricatured in *A prediction*? In the process of its overloading, what lines does it flirt with and which does it reinscribe?



Left: Fig. 3. *A prediction* by Covarrubias, 1926
 Right: Fig. 4. Self-portrait in profile by Van Vechten, 1934

In the first place, a caricature transforms someone or something that exists in real life. Yet, even considering Van Vechten's unmistakably European features alongside *A prediction* does not quite offer a key to the uncanny discomfort that Covarrubias's caricature elicits (fig. 4). Taking the

¹⁷¹ White 20.

futurity of the title as a clue, it appears that the caricature jests that Van Vechten will undergo a racial metamorphosis, becoming black. However, the drawing's exaggerated phrenology takes Van Vechten's darker skin tone well beyond the cosmetic possibilities of blackface, which many, past and present, have accused Van Vechten of doing in his writing. Yet, as David Batchelor writes, "Cosmetics adorn, embellish, supplement. If color is cosmetic, it is added to the surface of things, and probably at the last moment. It does not have a place *within* things; it is an afterthought; it can be rubbed off."¹⁷² Indeed, for all blackface performers from Thomas Dartmouth Rice to Bert Williams, the exaggerated features drawn with paint were temporary. By contrast, *A prediction* depicts a radical *physical* transformation by Africanizing Van Vechten's features, suggesting anxiety about racial purity. However, were this caricature to have an atavistic purpose—serving as a kind of moral warning about Van Vechten's "inspectin'"—it would also undermine the author's whiteness by defaulting to a primitive otherness that already exists *within* him. Thus, rather than offering a clear message, the caricature seemingly goes around and around within a hypo-critical loop of offensiveness, landing neither here nor there as it seems to embody the controversy of the novel that would define the author's career.

Considering this caricature was done by a close friend of the subject, it seems highly unlikely that this depiction is taking Van Vechten to task for his love of blackness. With this in mind, Covarrubias's caricature does not disfigure Van Vechten in any meaningful sense; arguably, it *re-figures* him, asking what presumptions viewers bring with them as it becomes overloaded it with meaning. Thus, while one might look at the primitivism of *A prediction* and immediately see a racist caricature, what it arguably caricatures is racist anxiety about preserving whiteness. Using the example of *Moby Dick*, Batchelor writes:

¹⁷² Batchelor 52.

The virtuous whiteness of the West...conceals...less mystical terrors. These are more local and altogether palpable; they are, mainly, terrors of the flesh. Melville's great white whale is, conceivably, a monstrous corruption of the great Western ideal of the classical body. This body, at least in its remodeled neo-classical version, was of course a pure, polished, unembellished, untouched and untouchable white.¹⁷³

The chromophobia of *A prediction* arguably becomes easier to see when one compares it with other caricatures of Van Vechten by Covarrubias and gets the sense of an artist being taken by his ugly muse. For example, in the following cubist-inspired chromolithograph, Van Vechten's features are likewise exaggerated to the point of hostility, even grotesquerie (fig. 5).¹⁷⁴

¹⁷³ Batchelor 17.

¹⁷⁴ Van Vechten delighted in Covarrubias's rather unflattering caricatures, something that does not surprise. As Bernard notes, from a young age, Van Vechten "did not try to hide his strange looks; instead he cultivated them. He grew one long fingernail, on the pinky of his right hand. He wore his pants tight, his collars high, and pointed patent-leather boots. Others considered him off; he enjoyed the attention" (*Carl Van Vechten* 16). In other words, ugliness was something of a stock in trade for Van Vechten—a way of being in the world, but also a way of standing out from it. In this sense, then, Van Vechten's fetishization of ugliness is also of a piece with his fascination with blackness and caricature; the uncanny effect of watching a comic figure like Bert Williams in blackface was to watch someone inhabit a socially constructed mode of being while also imagining, to invoke Frimbo, the possibility of "another (cultural) order."



Fig. 5. *Carl Van Vechten* by Covarrubias, ca. 1923

Beside *A prediction*, such works suggest an artist fascinated by the formal possibilities of caricature, an artist who saw that the genius of its aesthetic strategy is the way it actively problematizes representation through uglification, the way it simultaneously *is* and *is not* what it appears to represent. As Bernard has convincingly argued, Van Vechten's racial politics are similarly described as a kind of cognitive dissonance. As she describes, to those "who supported the novel, its greatest achievement was that it dramatized the paradox at the core of black American identity, a paradox that shaped the lives of Van Vechten and his close friends, which was that the line between blacks and whites was both fact and fiction."¹⁷⁵

In a moment perhaps as scandalous as *A prediction*, Rudolph Fisher once opened a 1927 interview with *The New York Evening Post* by saying, "Once I was white," assuring the paper's

¹⁷⁵ Bernard, *Carl Van Vechten* 149, emphasis added.

skeptical reporter by adding, “Yes, that is quite true, sir.”¹⁷⁶ Instead of appealing to predictions, Fisher describes his past growing up in Providence, Rhode Island. Recalling that attending Brown University made him think and act like a white man, he confessed that he did not know the meaning of racial prejudice, at least for a long time. “Later on I became a physician and went back to practice in Harlem...” he told the *Post*. “*I acquired a pigmentation. I change color in Harlem. Yes, a pigmentation of the brain.* I saw black. I thought black. I have been through a most thrilling experience” (emphasis added). Fisher’s experience navigating different racial contexts was not unique, but his description perhaps explains the value he saw in a friendship with Van Vechten. Despite penning a 1927 essay entitled “The Caucasian Storms Harlem,” Fisher described Van Vechten as “the only pro-Negro Nordic with whom I am constantly comfortable.”¹⁷⁷ Although Van Vechten’s skin color, like Fisher’s, did not actually change when he went to Harlem, both authors shared a passion for blackness, enjoying a most thrilling and transformative experience, even if the white author did not exactly “see black” or “think black” in the same way Fisher describes. Mostly oblivious to his white privilege, Van Vechten likely would not have seen the value or complexity of acquiring “a pigmentation of the brain”; his well-publicized “inspectin’ ” may have had the ring of an insider’s point of view, but the politics of the color line would always make him at worst a slummer and at best a kind of racial *flâneur*.

Nevertheless, Fisher’s friendship with Van Vechten adds a layer of complexity to the caricatures both authors employ, and such complexity is precisely what each admired in each other’s personality. Van Vechten consistently praised Fisher’s sense of irony, and Fisher did the same with Van Vechten. Despite the color line, each could make fun of one’s racial

¹⁷⁶ Emphasis added. All Fisher quotations in this section come from a *New York Evening Post* interview, “Harlem Doctor Produces Dusky Sherlock Holmes,” that was written by Norman Klein and published July 27, 1927.

¹⁷⁷ Bernard, *Carl Van Vechten* 6.

characteristics but at the same time still have great fun; each could make light of racial difference while also illuminating the complexity and ugliness of American race relations. This is precisely what Fisher achieved in *The Conjure-Man Dies*, which had just been published at the time of his interview with *The New York Evening Post*. “I tried to be realistic,” he said of the novel. “Negroes in fiction by Caucasian writers are either comics in a burlesque sense—what I call the canine Negro, loyal like a dog—or else they are so vicious they ought to be shot.” In other words, the black characters depicted by white people were often stock characters that simply stylized racism through aesthetic judgments. Strategically, black characters were often simple, mean, or, in Jinx Jenkins’s case, ugly.

Fisher’s invocation of the “realism” of *The Conjure-Man Dies* should not be taken as a literary designation. Rather, by “realism,” Fisher means “complexity.” Reinforcing this point, he adds later on, “Someday...if I keep on exploring the souls of my patients, as well as their innards, I may write a tremendously big novel.” Unfortunately, Fisher died about two years later, and regrettably never lived to complete a planned series of Detective Dart and Doctor Archer stories. Nevertheless, Fisher certainly probed the innards of his character, realizing that the aesthetic humanism of figures like Du Bois in “Criteria of Negro Art” could nevertheless flatten the complexities of blackness, ignoring that elusive pigment of the brain. “What are Negroes anyway?” Fisher asked. “...Are they lamp-black Anglo-Saxons or are they creatures with peculiar, unique characteristics?” Theorizing blackness invites racial pride but also racist typification. As the New Negro Movement was well familiar, blackness, like the ugly aesthetics of caricature, remains complex despite its simplistic popular portrayal. The characters Fisher

depicted were “drawn from reality,” but they also sought to reshape the perception of that reality.¹⁷⁸

From Van Vechten’s inspectin’ to Fisher’s detection, both *Nigger Heaven* and *The Conjure-Man Dies* suggest that the allure of beauty—its simple, self-justifying logic—might not only be deceptive and deluding but perhaps also fatal for thinking about art alongside racial progress. Embracing the very ugliness that a thinker like Du Bois sought to minimize, both *Nigger Heaven* and *The Conjure-Man Dies* caricature the racial anxiety underlying Harlem in the early decades of the twentieth century, showing how the possibilities of black life were fraught by the contradictory aesthetic logic of racial difference. Unlike the beauty of “Criteria of Negro Art,” they saw that ugliness was at once a thrill and a challenge to reimagine the contours drawn by the color line.

¹⁷⁸ I borrow this phrase from the aforementioned *New York Evening Post* interview.

CHAPTER 3

Los Angeles is Burning: The Grotesque Camp of Nathanael West

My man, if you can wear this glass eye, I have a job for you.

—*A Cool Million*

Jeepers Creepers, where'd ya get those peepers?

Jeepers Creepers, where'd ya get those eyes?

—*The Day of the Locust*

America Seen Through a Glass Eye, Darkly

If beauty is in the eye of the beholder, as the saying goes, then it is difficult to parse the symbolism of the descriptively “beautiful glass eye” received by the hero of Nathanael West’s 1934 novel *A Cool Million: The Dismantling of Lemuel Pitkin* (155).¹⁷⁹ A satire of Horatio Alger’s rags-to-riches theme, the novel follows wide-eyed Lemuel Pitkin as he peers into the deepest recesses of the American Scene—and at a tremendous cost. Attempting to save the family farm in Vermont, Lemuel embarks on an ill-fated journey that results in innumerable acts of bodily violence, almost none of which are a result of his own doing. “His teeth were pulled out,” states his eulogy. “His eye was gouged from his head. His thumb was removed. His scalp was torn away. His leg was cut off. And, finally, he was shot through the heart” (179). Of all of these acts of “dismantling,” the loss of Lemuel’s eye is the most revealing, and not just because we learn early on that his “eyes shone with a light that bespoke a high heart” (73). Rather, it is because

¹⁷⁹ All references to West’s writings are drawn from *Nathanael West: Novels and Other Writings*, henceforth abbreviated as *NW*.

so much of what Lemuel sees defies belief, common sense, and human decency.

As Lemuel's spectacular disfigurement reveals, West's American Scene is profoundly ugly due to grotesque displays of violence marked by affective short-circuits that go well beyond the "ugly feelings" that I discuss, in part, in Chapter 1. In most instances, *A Cool Million's* sadistic treatment of Lemuel elicits apathy, or even comic pleasure, from those who watch him suffer. Lemuel's body, as an object, is certainly uglified over the course of the novel, but as Stein would say, there is "an ugliness in the relation" between that body and those who witness its dismantling. Hence, while in previous chapters ugliness has been examined as an aesthetic and as an embodied phenomenon, West's work now provides an opportunity to explore the social dimension of ugliness within the American Scene. As *A Cool Million* and West's later novel, *The Day of the Locust*, make clear, the author was fascinated by the convergence of the aesthetic and the social, often through grotesque spectacles that make legible the violence that can ensue when collective desires are frustrated by the deceptive surface of American life.

West's fascination with the duplicitous nature of appearances becomes explicit late in *A Cool Million*, when Lemuel survives being scalped and reluctantly agrees to display his mangled body in a traveling sideshow. When the plan ends up being a bust, Lemuel encounters a self-advertised Chamber of American Horrors, a traveling museum that displays "Animate and Inanimate Hideosities." Filled with all sorts of kitschy and grotesque objects—including a giant, pulsating lamp resembling a hemorrhoid—the Chamber of American Horrors certainly fulfills its design to shock and appall. Yet, one of the museum's most salient features is its capacity to fascinate and awe. In addition to many of its objects being outright unsightly, very few are, in fact, what they appear to be. "Along the walls were tables on which were displayed collections of objects whose distinction lay in the great skill with which their materials had been disguised. Paper had been made to look like wood, wood like rubber, rubber like steel, steel like cheese,

cheese like glass, and, finally, glass like paper” (163). In a world where Victrolas look like flowerpots and revolvers are actually candy containers, West deftly lampoons the loss of Lemuel’s eye: as a grotesque object itself, the fake eye he receives is as good as the real thing—although it may hardly bespeak his hero’s high heart.

Near the close of the novel, Lemuel’s remaining “good eye” indirectly leads to his violent death. Hard up on money, he later lucks out when a comedy duo solicits a one-eyed man for a stooge act. Lemuel’s new employers outfit him with a new glass eye, a toupee, and fake appendages, but only to violently knock these off while on stage. The performance effectively rehearses the novel’s violent proceedings—but to the raucous laughter of an audience. Eventually, Lemuel’s slapstick performance wins him the opportunity to deliver a pre-written speech in support of a fascist revolution that has been brewing throughout the novel, a movement about which he is clueless.¹⁸⁰ When Lemuel delivers the speech on stage, his pitiful appearance causes such an uproar that he must assure the audience as follows: “I am a clown...but there are times when even clowns must grow serious. This is such a time. I...” (177). Shot by an assassin and claimed as a martyr by an incipient National Revolutionary Party, the battered clown becomes the stuff of legend in the novel’s final pages—memorialized in songs, his name greeted with cheers of “All hail, the American Boy!” (179). The irony, of course, is that Lemuel has been failed by his country, deceived and brutalized from family farm to grave.

While *A Cool Million* conveys a dismal worldview through the gratuitous brutality Lemuel endures, what West once said of *The Day of the Locust* might give his more scandalized

¹⁸⁰ West described the novel as taking “seriously the possibility of a Fascist America” (NW 791). In light of this comment, it is worth observing that the final mob scene in West’s later novel *The Day of the Locust* is eerily evocative of *Kristallnacht* in Nazi Germany, the infamous pogrom that occurred approximated two years before that novel was published.

readers pause. Writing, “I do not want to shock just for shocking’s sake,” West argues that his excessive—and signature—displays of violence are not merely provocations but part and parcel of a scathing social critique of the American Scene.¹⁸¹ Even in a letter written before *A Cool Million* was published, he described his unflinching approach to writing as to “[d]o it obviously—cruelty, irresponsible torture, simply, obviously, casually [*sic*]...Not only in but against the American grain and yet in. Idiomatic pain.”¹⁸² Understanding such idiomatic pain to be central to West’s use of violence helps to recast the ugly objects, bodies, and situations that populate his own idiosyncratic vision of the American Scene. For, why is it that the author repeatedly resorts to grotesque comedy to underscore the unreliability of appearances and the idiomatic pain they inflict upon the body? Tracking the dialectic of beauty and ugliness as well as glamour and hideousness in West’s work, the present chapter asks: What role does the aesthetic play in the American Scene’s depiction of a violent social world?

For one thing, Lemuel’s “dismantling” appears to invert a classical myth of ideal beauty that has profound social implications—the myth of the Ancient Greek painter Zeuxis. Often celebrated as the greatest painter of all time, Zeuxis most famously selected the fairest body parts of five models in order to paint a composite image of Helen of Troy, whose beauty rivaled that of the gods themselves.¹⁸³ West, whose first novel, we might note, takes place within the bowels of the Trojan Horse, likewise renders Lemuel into an assortment of body parts to be reconfigured. However, as “The American Boy,” Lemuel becomes the paradigmatic figure of the grotesque body, which Mikhail Bakhtin famously describes as “a body in the act of becoming. It is never finished, never completed; it is continually built, created, and builds and

¹⁸¹ NW 783.

¹⁸² NW 774.

¹⁸³ For more on the myth of Zeuxis selecting models, see Mansfield.

creates another body.”¹⁸⁴ Whereas the ancients during Zeuxis’s time believed in an alliance of beauty, truth, and goodness that could ultimately render an ideal whole, Lemuel’s vivisection alternatively suggests a carnivalesque American Scene characterized by ugliness, farce, and apathy.¹⁸⁵ As West combines objects, bodies, and violent situations into excessive spectacles of disgust and wonder, the ugliness of the American Scene emphasizes the incoherence of the social world, even as its existence presents itself before one’s very eyes.

Taking *A Cool Million*’s central themes of dismantling and dissembling as my starting point, I contend that West was a Zeuxis-esque author whose camp artistic sensibility not only embraced the incoherence of ugliness but also called into question the social value of aesthetic judgment more broadly. As critics have observed, West’s novels are both comic and grotesque — characterized by exaggeration, artifice, and black humor — and yet, surprisingly, little attention has been paid to the decidedly camp dimensions of the author’s ugly worldview. Beginning with Susan Sontag’s highly influential definition of camp, I argue that West’s grotesque fascination with optics and art in his magnum opus *The Day of the Locust* reflects a cultural context in which aesthetic judgment has become simultaneously as laughable as it has become all the more crucial to navigating the American culture industry. To make this point, I compare *The Day of the Locust* with a contemporary camp figure from West’s time in Hollywood, the largely forgotten Pictorialist photographer William Mortensen. Alongside Mortensen’s highly manipulated photographs, which express the photographer’s belief in a “command to look,” I contend that

¹⁸⁴ Bakhtin 317.

¹⁸⁵ We might also see Lemuel’s “dismantling” through the Rosenkranzian lens of *disfiguration*, or “deformation” — one of the three characteristics of the ugly I examine, alongside formlessness and incorrectness, in Chapter 1. While Rosenkranz views deformation as an inherent aesthetic flaw (i.e., as a state of being), West presents disfiguration as an act. In other words, rather than simply being malformed, Lemuel’s body becomes the violent record of his ongoing disfiguration.

The Day of the Locust presents an unflinching portrait of the American Scene that seemingly challenges readers to turn away from the violent social world it depicts. In a world where social relationships break down and are laid bare, West's work, I argue, makes a grotesque camp sensibility central to its artistic vision. To illustrate the culminating effect of grotesque camp—when life imitates art—I conclude the chapter with a brief turn to John Schlesinger's 1975 film adaptation of *The Day of the Locust*.

The Grotesqueries of Camp

In her influential 1964 essay "Notes on Camp," Susan Sontag describes "camp" as "art that proposes itself seriously, but cannot be taken altogether seriously because it is 'too much.'"¹⁸⁶ Characterized by a propensity for exaggeration and artifice, a camp sensibility emphasizes style over content and spurns mainstream taste for the idiosyncratic and the esoteric, often to comic effect. Despite its playful subject matter and tone, "Notes on Camp" has been heavily criticized in recent decades for offering a vision of camp that is apparently ambivalent toward identity politics. Sontag's critics have rightfully pointed to her bracketing of the queer roots of camp as necessarily problematic and have also usefully documented a variety of camp subtypes that seem to prove the limits of her original vision.¹⁸⁷ That being said, the present argument acknowledges Sontag's essay as an original and powerful intervention in the relationship of the aesthetic to taste. In particular, Sontag's camp sensibility will provide an invaluable logic to understand how *The Day of the Locust* consistently upends the value of aesthetic judgment through artificiality, excess, and farce to achieve a notoriously grotesque

¹⁸⁶ Sontag, "Notes" 284.

¹⁸⁷ For more on Sontag's critical reception and the diverse ways in which camp has been interpreted, see Drushel and Peters.

effect. “I am strongly drawn to Camp,” Sontag muses, “and almost as strongly offended by it. That is why I want to talk about it, and why I can....To name a sensibility, to draw its contours and to recount its history, requires *a deep sympathy modified by revulsion*.”¹⁸⁸

Like the exaggerations of camp, which I will continue to define below, the word “grotesque” also lends itself to revulsion. Originating from the Italian word for “grotto,” the earliest works of grotesque art date to the Renaissance discovery of previously unseen or hidden artworks from antiquity, artworks that often featured hybrid human/nonhuman figures and in which “the laws of statics, symmetry, and proportion are no longer valid.”¹⁸⁹ Since the Renaissance, “grotesque” has come to broadly describe an aesthetic sensibility of radical incongruity, juxtaposition, or carnivalesque inversion.¹⁹⁰ However, as I use the term throughout this chapter, I weave together two specific articulations. The first comes from Wolfgang Kayser’s classic study *The Grottesque in Art and Literature*, which describes how, uncannily, “[t]he grotesque world is—and is not—our own world.”¹⁹¹ For Kayser, the grotesque presents an alienating “image of our world...breaking apart,” a world which is paradoxically *both* one’s own *and* entirely a world apart.¹⁹² The second articulation of the grotesque used in this chapter views it as a *transformational* relationship between ugliness and comedy. As Karl Rosenkranz observes,

¹⁸⁸ Sontag, “Notes” 276, emphasis added. For an examination of grotesque camp in the field of queer studies, see Michael V. Perez’s essay “Pretty Is Not Enough: Notes Toward a Grotesque Camp.”

¹⁸⁹ Kayser 21.

¹⁹⁰ Although Sontag specifically argues that camp does not invert values, I would argue that camp and the grotesque share an understanding of the arbitrariness of social distinctions that makes for an apt comparison. As Justin D. Edwards and Rune Graulund observe, “[T]he grotesque has the power to eliminate borders: it can reveal how the boundaries between ‘normal’ and ‘abnormal’ are fluid, not fixed, and how grotesquerie can lead to an erasure of common distinctions” (9). See Edwards and Graulund’s useful discussion of camp and the grotesque in *Grotesque*, pp. 71–74.

¹⁹¹ Kayser 37.

¹⁹² Kayser 33.

with the grotesque “the accidental and the arbitrary rise from ugliness to *transfigure* it into the comical.”¹⁹³ To borrow yet another phrase from Kayser, in this transformation, an “ugly and unnatural aspect is not portrayed as something by itself but as an integral part” of a larger world or human comedy. And we need look no further than Zeuxis for an example of the uncanny, comic dimensions of the grotesque. As recounted in *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, an early modern masterpiece of the grotesque, the legendary painter of beauty famously died laughing at one of his own paintings—the apparently hideous, “grimacing portrait of an old woman.”¹⁹⁴

Considering that the grotesque is naturally allied with ugliness, one of the most remarkable aspects of camp is its unconventional relationship with aesthetic judgment.¹⁹⁵ Camp, as Sontag observes, “turns its back on the good-bad axis of ordinary aesthetic judgment. Camp doesn’t reverse things. It doesn’t argue that the good is bad, or the bad is good. What it does is to offer for art (and life) a different—a supplementary—set of standards”; “Camp taste is, above all, a mode of enjoyment, of appreciation—not judgment.”¹⁹⁶ Accordingly, ugliness finds an unusual ally in camp—for, “the way of camp[] is *not in terms of beauty*, but in terms of the degree of artifice, of stylization.”¹⁹⁷ While objects, persons, and scenes can be camp in themselves, the general effect of Sontag’s camp sensibility is to favor the idiosyncratic perspective of the

¹⁹³ Rosenkranz 141, emphasis added.

¹⁹⁴ Rabelais 717. I am grateful to Mansfield’s study for this reference.

¹⁹⁵ Most broadly, camp dismisses how aesthetic judgments arbitrarily solidify into cultural canons of accepted taste. Sontag herself notes that camp has lent itself to the formation of a cultural canon and accordingly cites Tiffany lamps, tabloid headlines, and *King Kong* as “examples of items which are part of the canon of Camp” (“Notes” 277). That being said, she also observes that the canon of camp is open to change, and I would add that it is unusually flexible in this regard. Surprisingly, Sontag’s critics have been especially helpful in revealing how the judgments associated with cultural canons can be remade and in articulating the various subcultures associated with camp (see, again, Drushel and Peters for more on this point).

¹⁹⁶ Sontag, “Notes” 286, 291.

¹⁹⁷ Sontag, “Notes” 227, emphasis added.

individual over the accepted taste of one's social milieu. We have already seen an example of this Stein's novel *The Making of Americans*, when the narrator describes the "very strange feeling when one is loving a clock that is to every one of your class of living an ugly and a foolish one and one really likes such a thing and likes it very much and liking it is a serious thing."¹⁹⁸ In contrast, however, to the anxiety of Stein's narrator toward her own aesthetic judgments, a camp sensibility revels in its particular view of the world. "Camp taste," Sontag writes, "is a kind of love, love for human nature. It relishes, rather than judges, the little triumphs and awkward intensities of 'character.'"¹⁹⁹

Although West predates Sontag's definition of camp, he and his Hollywood milieu appear to anticipate the cultural politics of camp, but with a much darker cast. As Justus Nieland aptly observes, West's turn to the comic is "harnessed to the task of inhabiting—not transcending—a resolutely contingent social world where 'human nature' has lost conceptual coherence."²⁰⁰ As I argue, *The Day of the Locust* is characterized by a *grotesque* camp sensibility that resides in such awkward intensities of character represented by artist-figures like Tod Hackett and the Greeners. Capturing this sentiment, West relished the following description of the novel, which he attributed to fellow writer Dashiell Hammett: "I don't like books about Hollywood, but this one is different and held me all the way. A really swell job, with the God damndest set of characters I ever read about."²⁰¹ While Sontag's camp expresses a *love* for human nature and "find[s] the success in certain passionate failures," grotesque camp expresses its fascination with, to borrow the phrase of one West scholar, "failed humans."²⁰² Like a violent

¹⁹⁸ G. Stein, *The Making of Americans* 485.

¹⁹⁹ Sontag, "Notes" 291.

²⁰⁰ Nieland 66.

²⁰¹ *NW* 784.

²⁰² Sontag, "Notes" 291; Klug 24.

accident from which a viewer cannot look away, “grotesque” in this instance expresses the mysterious hold of an ugly object, person, or scene despite its same power to solicit shock, horror, or disgust.²⁰³ Ugliness, here, need not necessarily be visual, although it often is; an apparently glamorous subject can, like the deceptive objects of the Chamber of American Horrors in *A Cool Million*, become grotesque when external beauty belies corruption below the surface. (In *The Day of the Locust*, for example, Faye Greener is precisely grotesque because her beauty contradicts her manipulation of and cruelty toward others.) Finally, while camp is simply “too much,” grotesque camp is violently *excessive*. As we began to see with the caricature’s appeal to resemblance and overloading in Chapter 2, grotesque camp similarly discovers a perverse pleasure in the unbearable effect—or, rather, the “idiomatic pain”—of life imitating art.

The surrealist connotations of this last point—the grotesque relation of life to art—deserve special mention. A prominent strain of criticism has situated the author with respect to a crisis of representation in the Depression era, arguing that West was a surrealist. For example, Jonathan Veitch has articulated “obstacles to representation in a society increasingly dominated by the obfuscating spectacles of advanced capitalism,” and he has elsewhere used the term “superrealism” (an alternate translation of *surréalisme*) to refute another strain of criticism that views West as a proto-postmodernist.²⁰⁴ While West was generally skeptical about being affiliated with artistic movements, in an advertisement for his first novel *The Dream Life of Balwo Snell*, the author did evoke similarities with the surrealists. Describing himself in the third-

²⁰³ Perhaps another way of understanding the aesthetic affect of grotesque camp is through Lauren Berlant’s notion of “cruel optimism,” a relation in which attachment to an object or scene inhibits a subject’s capacity to flourish. In this case, fascination with (or attachment to) failure might be the result of hoping for a successful outcome despite its obvious inability to achieve one. See Berlant.

²⁰⁴ Veitch, “Reading Hollywood” 217. See also Veitch, *American Superrealism*. For a typical postmodern interpretation of West, see Klug.

person, West wrote: “It is difficult to compare N. W. West with other comic writers, as he is vicious, mean, ugly, obscene and insane....In his use of the violently dissociated, the dehumanized marvelous, the deliberately criminal and imbecilic, he is much like...certain of the *surréalistes*.”²⁰⁵ It is my contention that the surrealist label certainly holds for his first novel but that this does not hold up for a mature work such as *The Day of the Locust*.²⁰⁶ As that novel’s emphasis on the “photographic” will show, the avant-garde of surrealism was displaced by the visual apparatus of the culture industry: the camera’s eye. This displacement was so complete that, as Sontag writes in *On Photography*, “The mainstream of photographic activity has shown that a Surrealist manipulation or theatricalization of the real is unnecessary, if not actually redundant.”²⁰⁷ For now, what description *does* hold up for all of West’s work is his self-identification as “a comic writer”—this despite the excessively bleak outlook of his work. In addition to perversely describing his 1933 novel *Miss Lonelyhearts* as “The Candide of the Twentieth Century,” West reflected that some “write out of hope and for a new and better world—but I’m a comic writer and it seems impossible for me to handle any of the ‘big things’ without seeming to laugh or at least smile.”²⁰⁸ Accordingly, the framework of grotesque camp works to yoke together the comic and violence without reducing it to a simple caricature (mere resemblance without overloading) or the burlesque.²⁰⁹

Though I will revisit a definition of grotesque camp throughout this chapter, for now it is enough to consider how *The Day of the Locust* concerns itself with the uncanny optics of art.

²⁰⁵ NW 397.

²⁰⁶ To clarify: I am not interested in characterizing West’s entire oeuvre as grotesquely camp; my argument specifically refers to the aesthetic effect and cultural politics of *The Day of the Locust*.

²⁰⁷ Sontag, *On Photography* 52.

²⁰⁸ NW 778, 794.

²⁰⁹ See Martin for an example of West’s burlesque sensibility.

As I contend, the novel offers a world seen through something like the glass eye of Lemuel Pitkin, with the Hollywood landscape doubling as an American Scene characterized by violent and comic juxtapositions of beauty and ugliness.

The Painter at Work

While a conventional understanding of camp in *The Day of the Locust* might lead us to pursue figures such as a crooning female impersonator or a rubber horse submerged in a swimming pool, an understanding of camp's grotesqueries will instead direct us to the novel's artist-protagonist, Tod Hackett. Throughout the novel, Tod obsesses over "The Burning of Los Angeles," a proposed painting that, from the narrator's point of view, "definitely proved he had talent" (242). As Tod works as a Hollywood costume- and set-designer for various films, he simultaneously labors over a "series of cartoons" that constitute the preliminary sketches "for his canvas of Los Angeles on fire" (308). When he first describes the apocalyptic subject of his painting at length, he suggests a grotesque juxtaposition of the violence depicted with its intended emotional effect on the viewer. "He was going to show the city burning at high noon, so that the flames would have to compete with the desert sun and thereby appear less fearful, more like bright flags flying from roofs and windows than a terrible holocaust. *He wanted the city to have quite a gala air as it burned, to appear almost gay. And the people who set it on fire would be a holiday crowd*" (308, emphasis added). According to Tod, the artistic triumph of "The Burning of Los Angeles" would be the precise—and perverse—way it casts the scene of "a terrible holocaust" with the effect of "a gala," manipulating the viewer to see the painting with an uncanny combination of horror and wonder.

As with the Chamber of American Horrors in *A Cool Million*, "The Burning of Los Angeles" reveals itself to be an exercise in duplicitous looking and collecting, for the painting

functions as a kind of artistic catalog of the awkward intensities of character described by Sontag. Under Tod's artistic gaze, characters from the novel, and even anonymous individuals from Los Angeles, are transformed into grotesque caricatures that he imagines roaming the apocalyptic landscape as an angry mob. Like Stein's obsessive narrator in *The Making of Americans*, Tod remains enthralled by particular character types, especially the miserable Midwesterners he sees throughout Southern California, people whose "eyes filled with hatred....[who] had come to California to die" (242); "They," we are told, "were the people he felt he *must* paint," and accordingly, they constitute the bulk of his preliminary sketches for the painting he plans to carry out (242, emphasis added).

Just as Tod conceives "The Burning of Los Angeles" to convey the tantalizing effect of a gala, his caricatures similarly point to a scandal of artistic looking, of appreciating subjects and scenes that, like camp, transgress the accepted canon of taste. For one thing, before Tod arrives in Los Angeles, he worries that he will never paint again due to the anxiety that "he was going the way of all his classmates, toward illustration or mere handsomeness" (242). When Tod finally arrives on the West Coast and looks into the eyes of the Midwesterners, his artistic vision is transformed. Declaring "[he] would never again do a fat red barn, old stone wall or sturdy Nantucket fisherman," Tod trades more conventional artistic idols, such as painter Winslow Homer and engraver Thomas Ryder, for well-known caricaturists like Goya and Daumier, who convey a much bleaker worldview (242). However, as Tod continues to encounter the Midwesterners, they repeatedly elicit new stylistic approaches to his carrying out "The Burning of Los Angeles," suggesting their status as a kind of artistic enigma. (Indeed, in light of Chapter 2, it is worth noting that Tod's "cartoons" inhabit the uneasy aesthetic strategies of caricature, which both *is* and *is not* what it appears to depict, simultaneously obfuscating and

making legible an underlying “truth” in an embodied or social context.²¹⁰) While Tod first sees the Midwesterners and his proposed masterpiece through the lens of caricaturists, he later sees both through Old Masters of the grotesque, “certain Italian artists of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, of Salvator Rosa, Francesco Guardi and Monsu Desiderio, the painters of Decay and Mystery” (325). What is more, he later trades these role-models for the late-Baroque painter Alessandro Magnasco, suggesting further uneasiness about the unconventional subjects he is compelled to depict.

Scholars have continued to debate the significance of Tod’s artistic influences. Thomas Strychacz has argued for “the primacy of Tod’s role in elevating an artistic discourse that transcends the fragmentation of Hollywood art,” while Donald T. Torchiana makes the more grandiose claim that “the final meaning of the book requires in part a knowledge of the grotesque tradition in painting.”²¹¹ Despite validating the role of the grotesque, however, Tod’s artistic influences do little to account for Rita Barnard’s apt observation that “high culture is no more valuable, no more transformative” for West than mass culture.²¹² What critical accounts of artistic influences in *The Day of the Locust* tend to miss is the *shifting* indexicality of the names that Tod cites and the novel’s affinity with mass culture more broadly—that one name is as good

²¹⁰ Ellenberger’s useful research into the historical migration of Midwesterners to Southern California helps to clarify how the Midwesterners in the novel are symbolic of a struggle to define American values. The Midwesterners’ disillusionment with the decline of a largely white and protestant value system transforms them from mere ornaments within Tod’s canvas into socially rooted caricatures. See Ellenberger.

²¹¹ Strychacz 157; Torchiana 252. See also Weisenburger, who describes the novel’s “paradox of artistic influence.”

²¹² Barnard 341. What is more, Barnard’s argument about West’s ambivalence toward the value of high and low culture over one another provides a seemingly useful rebuttal against Surrealist interpretations of *The Day of the Locust* that seek to pigeonhole West into a particular artistic school or movement.

as any other. Accordingly, the canon of accepted tastes, even niche ones, is suggestively hollow, replaceable over time.

As I argue, the Old Master paintings are less important as direct references than for indicating Tod's role, to borrow Strychacz's phrase, as an "artist-observer."²¹³ While Strychacz uses this phrase to denote the technical way in which Tod "form[s] chaos into composition," I use it to denote the way Tod rehearses the myth of Zeuxis, but through a conflicted mode of seeing that calls into question the logic of artistic wholeness and social unity.²¹⁴ In the first place, Tod affirms Pierre Bourdieu's argument that *the aesthetic eye*, cultivated by taste, "is a product of history reproduced by education."²¹⁵ By this, I mean that the artist's Ivy League education conditions him to see the world with certain academic points of reference in mind, even if these turn out to be shifting references as he looks more closely. His academic training allows him to see the world in terms of artistic styles, which effectively impose aesthetic meaning onto what Stein would call the "unharmonious unreality" of everyday living. In the second place, we can also understand Tod's aesthetic eye through Sontag's notion of *the camp eye*. Not only does his education inform his artistic worldview, as Bourdieu would point out, but Tod also, in Sontag's words, "see[s] the world as an aesthetic phenomenon."²¹⁶ To invoke a familiar example, we have already seen in "The Burning of Los Angeles," how the camp eye possesses the "power to *transform* experience."²¹⁷ From the violently repressive Midwesterners to the over-the-top Greeners, whom I examine in the next section, Tod is drawn to and strives to depict excessive subjects that threaten to undo the social world that gives rise to them. Thus, as an artist-

²¹³ Strychacz 156.

²¹⁴ Ibid.

²¹⁵ Bourdieu 3.

²¹⁶ Sontag, "Notes" 277.

²¹⁷ Ibid., emphasis added.

observer, Tod discovers artistic value in supposedly distasteful tropes such as violence and artifice that become central to depicting the self-effacing nature of figures in “The Burning of Los Angeles” and of social relations more broadly.

The Beauty and Her Beasts

Perhaps the most potent figure of grotesque camp in *The Day of the Locust* is the novel’s stand-in for feminine beauty—Tod’s love interest, Faye Greener. A 17-year-old aspiring actress, Faye is as beautiful as she is bad at performing. Despite boasting that theatre is in the family blood, Faye’s only official credit is a “two-reel farce” in which “[s]he had only one line to speak...and spoke it badly” (250). However, she gets far with her good looks and charms others with a cavalier attitude toward life. As Homer Simpson, one of Tod’s Midwestern types, reflects: “He thought her extremely beautiful, but what affected him still more was her vitality. She was taut and vibrant. She was as shiny as a new spoon. / Although she was seventeen, she was dressed like a child of twelve in a white cotton dress with a blue sailor collar. Her long legs were bare and she had blue sandals on her feet” (281). Faye’s ill-fitting clothes, too small for her age, contrast with her outsized personality, which seemingly does not need Tod’s camp eye to be transformed. Tod’s “interest in her grew despite the things she said and he continued to find her very exciting. Had any other girl been so affected, he would have thought her intolerable. Faye’s affectations, however, were so completely artificial that he found them charming” (292). Whether or not we attribute Faye’s campiness to herself or to Tod affirms an ambiguity about the camp eye: as Sontag writes, “It’s not *all* in the eye of the beholder.”²¹⁸ This ambiguity will

²¹⁸ Sontag, “Notes” 277.

serve as the precise source of tension between Faye and Tod as the two compete to assert the artistic validity of their respective crafts.

Faye derives much of her camp personality from her father, Harry Greener. As West writes, “The old man was a clown and Tod had all the painter’s usual love of clowns. But what was more important, he felt that his clownship was a clue to the people who stared (a painter’s clue, that is—a clue in the form of a symbol), just as Faye’s dreams were another” (261). A former vaudeville and burlesque performer, Harry is reduced to selling silver polish made in his toilet and dragging Faye on sales calls throughout Los Angeles. Like Lemuel Pitkin in *A Cool Million*, Harry once achieved fame as a “bedraggled Harlequin” in a stage act that left him “tattered and bloody, but still sweet” (262). And like Zeuxis, who died laughing at his own artistry, Harry almost dies of laughter when his slapstick attempt to sell polish to Homer Simpson eventually leads him to his deathbed. After unnerving Homer into buying some polish with a series of disturbing laughs, Harry starts up again once Faye enters the scene and steals Homer’s attention with her attractive looks. The laughter so upsets Faye that, not to be outdone, she begins “truck[ing], jerking her buttocks and shaking her head from side to side” while singing, “*Jeepers Creepers! / Where’d ya get those peepers?*” (283). While the episode puts Faye’s sadism and stage presence on full display, it also draws attention to Faye as a camp spectacle, stealing Homer’s stares—and heart—in the process.

Like Harry, Faye is the epitome of camp’s artifice and exaggeration, taking center stage wherever she goes. “Being with her was like being backstage during an amateurish, ridiculous play,” Tod reflects. “From in front, the stupid lines and grotesque situations would have made him squirm with annoyance, but because he saw the perspiring stagehands and the wires that held up the tawdry summerhouse with its tangle of paper flowers, he accepted everything and was anxious for it to succeed” (292). As a later scene reveals, however, Faye does not need Tod’s

or anyone else's hope to succeed; she seemingly has enough confidence to fake it until she will make it. When speaking to the screenwriter Claude Estee and others about her aspirations to become a movie star, Faye

went on and on, telling him how careers are made in the movies and how she intended to make hers. It was all nonsense. She mixed bits of badly understood advice from the trade papers with other bits out of the fan magazines and compared these with the legends that surrounded the activities of screen stars and executives. Without any noticeable transition, possibilities became probabilities and wound up as inevitabilities. (356)

Offering a "stream of words [that] rippled on without a break," Faye charms her audience, managing "to narrow their circle about her" despite spouting nonsense (356, 357). As Tod watches on, the description of Faye takes on an air of Zeuxis-like fabrication: the advice she cobbles together about the culture industry—assembling bits from papers, magazines, and gossip—becomes an inchoate narrative about her future success in Hollywood. To borrow the words of an early West critic, under Tod's gaze Faye is revealed to be "the grotesqueness of the screen made into real flesh," the artifice of which is only made persuasive to her admirers because of her beauty (and, of course, because of her sexualization).²¹⁹ In this sense, Faye's power to self-fashion, albeit superficially and indirectly, contrasts with Tod's own creative powers to recast Midwesterners as subjects worthy of artistic attention. Her agency challenges his own powers as an artist and an observer, and accordingly, only he is able to recognize the grotesque camp artifice of her composite parts.

Nevertheless, it becomes clear early on that Faye wields tremendous power over Tod. When looking at one of her gifts to him, an autographed film still from one of her awful performances as an extra, Tod reflects in gruesome detail that Faye lives her life as if playing the part of a bad femme fatale.

²¹⁹ Light 48.

Her invitation wasn't to pleasure, but to struggle, hard and sharp, closer to murder than to love. If you threw yourself on her, it would be like throwing yourself from the parapet of a sky-scraper. You would do it with a scream. You couldn't expect to rise again. Your teeth would be driven into your skull like nails into a pine board and your back would be broken. You wouldn't even have time to sweat or close your eyes. (251)

Despite Tod's deep attraction to Faye, she rejects his advances even as she continues to lead him on. "He had nothing to offer her, neither money nor looks, and she could only love a handsome man and would only let a wealthy man love her" (250). And yet, "looks"—or rather the act of looking—are all that Tod can achieve as an artist-observer, while voyeuristic looks, or "peeps," are all that Faye can offer him. He can look, but he cannot touch. Like the Midwesterners, Faye represents an artistic fascination to Tod, but one that he can never possess.

Spurned by Faye, Tod shows up to Harry's funeral so inebriated that "he had passed the brave state and was well into the *ugly* one" (318, emphasis added). By contrast, even when Faye demonstrates her "rage" at his drunkenness, Tod describes her as "still beautiful. That was because *her beauty was structural like a tree's*, not a quality of her mind or heart" (319, emphasis added). Notably, although he is not up to Faye's standard of handsomeness, Tod is only ever described as morally "ugly" in her presence—affirming, again, the Steinian notion of their being "an ugliness" in their relational dynamic.²²⁰ While Tod's camp eye can transform experience, Faye's grotesque camp sensibility *reciprocally* transforms Tod, so much so that, with respect to her, it puts him among the ranks of the Midwesterners, whose eyes are filled with hatred at the failed promises of Hollywood. "Nothing less violent than rape would do," he eventually concludes about Faye. "The sensation he felt was like that he got when holding an egg in his

²²⁰ It is worth pointing out that part of Tod's rage at Faye stems from her briefly working at a Hollywood brothel after Harry's death. Notably, the establishment's Madame, Mrs. Jennings, "insist[s] on discussing Gertrude Stein and Juan Gris" with her clients despite their interest in less abstract affairs (NW 257).

hand. Not that she was fragile or even seemed fragile. It wasn't that. It was her completeness, her egglike self-sufficiency, that made him want to crush her" (295). Like Zeuxis creating an ideal whole from parts, Tod seems to recognize that Faye's capacity to counterfeit "completeness" and "egglike self-sufficiency" emasculates his own floundering project, "The Burning of Los Angeles." While Tod hopes his own work will be judged by "its merit as painting," with the exception of some blocked out charcoal strokes on a canvas, the "The Burning of Los Angeles"—and the talent it would definitely prove—is never fully realized (308). Notably, his is also a work of counterfeit effect and one that, through collecting, also operates through a logic of assemblage.

As Susan Edmonds sharply observes, "The aesthetic struggles staged in *The Day of the Locust* center on Faye's body....induc[ing] a crisis in the aesthetic categories Tod uses to make art and to interpret the world."²²¹ Against Faye's generally camp air, Edmonds advocates the socio-historical importance of "tak[ing] Faye Greener's claims as an artist seriously," arguing that the novel tells "the story of a fierce competition between several artists and several kinds of art to shape the dominant terms of modern taste and culture."²²² In this competition, Faye, Tod, and Harry reflect a struggle between Hollywood cinema, high art, and vaudeville for cultural legitimacy. Although grotesque camp appears to level the cultural hierarchy being fought over, Edmonds very usefully articulates Faye as an example of "the Body Beautiful," implying that Faye's striking beauty and hyper-sexuality function as a kind of social critique of longstanding Victorian gender and class norms. Read in this vein, Tod's desire to rape Faye is both the ultra-violent manifestation of societal misogyny and, as we will now see, a vengeful act

²²¹ Edmonds 307.

²²² Ibid.

that is ultimately frustrated in the cultural competition to assert the seriousness of his own artistic aspirations.

If, as Alex Vernon describes, “a work of art can be interpreted as the space or stage for a displaced act of violence, as a site of contest, of violent identity formation and meaning-making, for the artist,” then this certainly extends to Tod’s sadistic depiction of Faye in “The Burning of Los Angeles.”²²³ Like the larger grotesque camp effect of the painting, Tod adds an unsettling, almost joyful air to the artistic detail in which Faye appears. Nude and fleeing an angry mob, Faye “is running with her eyes closed and a strange half-smile on her lips. Despite the dreamy repose of her face, her body is straining to hurl her along at top speed. The only explanation for this contrast is that she is enjoying the release that wild flight gives in much the same way that a game bird must when, after hiding for several tense minutes, it bursts from cover in complete, unthinking panic” (296–97). Strangely, Tod’s misogynistic depiction of Faye both resists and affirms his sexual desire for her. In the first place, she remains ahead of her pursuers, although her naked body is on the cusp of breaking down and she risks falling into their grasp. Yet Faye’s emotional calm, her “dreamy repose” and her reveling in “the wild flight” of her pursuit, suggests she is largely at home in the apocalyptic setting. The irony, of course, is that had “The Burning of Los Angeles” been completed, Faye would be forever held in this suspended state, eternally out of Tod’s reach. The fact that the painting remains unrealized, however, will essentially amount to the same thing.

While Naomi Schor has observed that, in aesthetics, the artistic detail has traditionally been associated with the feminine and with the symbolic notion of their integration into dominating social hierarchies, Faye is an *unassimilated* detail—one that does not get

²²³ Vernon 146.

incorporated into an artistic whole because the painting is never finished. In this sense, Faye symbolically resists the designs of her misogynistic creator. Though we might attribute this to Tod's artistic impotence, we might also consider his attraction to Faye alongside her own Zeuxis-like power. For, while Faye, like the Midwesterners, poses a grotesque artistic enigma to Tod, she certainly bears a powerfully camp artistic power of fabrication. In this sense, while art can, as Vernon argues, displace a communal need for violence, *grotesque* camp renders the consequences of artistically displaced violence into parts that do not add up to a coherent social world. As will be seen when I examine the novel's climactic mob scene, the ethical frame in which violence occurs becomes so scrambled by the artificial context in which West's characters operate. However, in order to understand that context we must first examine the Hollywood machine, which, just as Faye acts as an artistic detail that escapes the painter's grasp, manages to render the American Scene into a kind of runaway entertainment scenario, at once fueling fantasy, repressing desire, and warping characters' shared sense of reality.

Venus, Vulcan, and The Picture Business

If, as Edmonds convincingly described, *The Day of the Locust* presents a competition between three art forms—painting, cinema, and vaudeville—then the Hollywood photographer William Mortensen synthesizes Tod, Faye, and Harry's disparate artistic visions into a larger meditation about the cultural landscape in which they compete. As we will see, Mortensen's excessive approach to his craft helps to make sense of West's characters by situating their artistic visions within the shadow of the optical machine at the heart of Hollywood: the camera's eye. "The camera," Mortensen writes in *Venus and Vulcan*, "has a unique capacity for seeing further into a thing than the eye does and discovering refinements of texture, differences of tone, and tiny hidden patterns that neither the casual eye of the average beholder nor the searching eye

of the artist suspected were there.”²²⁴ Mortensen believed photography and cinema had more similarities than differences. Since the camera’s eye takes everything in, it is important for the photographer to embrace their Zeuxis-like power as a director—to select and emphasize details—and for the photograph to become, like every art form in West’s novel, an exercise in directed looking.

In an oft-cited scene from *The Day of the Locust*, a photograph plays a central role in Faye’s artistic imagination and reveals to Tod Hollywood’s influence on the actress’s artificial charm. Scheming with Tod to write up her stories and to sell the scripts to film studios, Faye searches for ideas, “go[ing] over them in her mind, as though they were a pack of cards, discarding one after another until she found the one that suited” (293). In reality, she only needs to look at her bedroom wall for inspiration. On it hangs “a large photograph that must have once been used in the lobby of a theatre to advertise a Tarzan picture....When she told her story, [Tod] knew that this photograph had a lot to do with inspiring it” (294). Perhaps due to the photograph before her, Faye surprises Tod by offering a “realistic” treatment of the extravagant storylines she recycles.

Although the events she described were miraculous, her description of them was realistic. The effect was similar to that obtained by the artists of the Middle Ages, who, when doing a subject like the raising of Lazarus from the dead or Christ walking on water, were *careful to keep all the details intensely realistic. She, like them, seemed to think that fantasy could be made plausible by a humdrum technique.* (296, emphasis added).

As Tod observes, Faye’s ideas are “realistic” not because they mechanically reproduce reality like the staged photograph on her wall, but because they provide a convincing account of “all the details,” managing the relationship of part to whole. While, as Schor writes, “realism is intimately bound up with the *sublimation of details*,” Faye’s grotesque camp sensibility prevents

²²⁴ Mortensen, *Venus and Vulcan* 102.

the full sublimation of details within the narrative she offers Tod.²²⁵ For, as she goes through her pack of cards exhausting ideas, her fantasies still require the eye and skill of studio artists like Tod to flesh them out and give them the convincing appearance of something new.

Just as West's characters profess their belief in the technical fabrication of fantasy, the photographer William Mortensen captured film stills exactly like the Tarzan photograph that inspires Faye's idea for a script as well as those like the autographed portrait she gives Tod earlier in the novel.²²⁶ Indeed, one could argue that it was men like Mortensen who directly influenced Faye as a creature of Hollywood. Working closely with legendary director Cecil B. DeMille in the 1920s, Mortensen photographed many Hollywood stars of the day, including Rudolph Valentino, Jean Harlow, Lon Chaney, and Anna May Wong, and, like Tod, even dabbled in costume and set design while pursuing his artistic aspirations on the side (fig. 1). While one of Faye's romantic pursuers, a dwarf named Abe Kusich, accuses another, the cowboy Earle Shoop, of looking like a "fugitive from the Western Costume Company," Mortensen happily used his time at the company to perfect his craft (348). Just two years before *The Day of the Locust* was published, Mortensen said that the location was where he quickly drew social misfits into his orbit. "I...developed a strange facility for attracting and gathering about me all sorts of odd characters and freaks," he recalled. "My studio swarmed with midgets [*sic*], acromegalic giants, fat ladies, pinheads, dog-faced boys, bearded women, and all the weird residue of defunct circuses. *These strange folk fascinated me with their pictorial possibilities.*"²²⁷

²²⁵ Schor 146.

²²⁶ Coincidentally, just as Tod references Medieval artists being inspired by the resurrection of Lazarus, Mortensen also did a series of photographs on the subject, which he discusses in *Venus and Vulcan*, pp. 116–21.

²²⁷ Mortensen, *Command* 36, emphasis added.



Fig. 1. Mortensen touching up a portrait of Jean Harlow, ca. 1930s

Although it is nearly impossible to establish a direct connection between West and the photographer, the latter's ubiquitous presence—working directly on major films or indirectly on them through their publicity, exhibiting his own work widely, and placing photographs in major publications such as *Vanity Fair*—made Mortensen an inextricable part of the Hollywood zeitgeist. Indeed, when West was in Hollywood in the 1930s, Mortensen was running a largely successful photography school in nearby Laguna Beach. As his photographs circulated widely, Mortensen was everywhere and nowhere all at once.

Like West, Mortensen maintained a lifelong fascination with the way Hollywood's fantasies could be rendered through photography's "humdrum" darkroom techniques, and this often played out in a binary between an artistic aspiration for beauty and an aesthetic fascination with ugliness, a fascination expressed above with the photographer's allusion to freakish bodies. Engrossed by the camera as both machine and artistic medium, Mortensen wrote widely about the theory of his craft, and in his extended essay, *Venus and Vulcan*, for example, the marriage of

the lame blacksmith god and with the goddess of beauty stood for the camera's "wedding of Technique to Aesthetic Impulse."²²⁸ Although Mortensen stated that the ultimate goal of art was beauty, one could argue that his departure from Hollywood in the 1930s to pursue his artistic vision was the direct product of his flirtation, like Tod, with excessive subjects and uglifying darkroom capabilities.

Dubbed "the anti-Christ" by Ansel Adams, Mortensen was renowned for dramatically manipulating images and readily self-identifying much of his work as "grotesque."²²⁹ In contrast to Adams, who depicted natural beauty and emphasized a more conservative style of "straight" photography, Mortensen believed, in one scholar's words, that "the negative was only the starting point for the creation of the picture."²³⁰ Many of his mid-career photographs reflect obvious technical experimentation, and his post-Hollywood photographs often surprise with their resemblance to paintings, engravings, and illustrations. In such works, artistic details bear an uneasy relation of part to whole. For example, in an untitled photograph depicting an incubus (fig. 2), the presence of distracting multiple exposures contributes to the self-conscious materiality of the photograph, drawing attention to its technical artifice while also evoking a diegetic element of black magic associated with the subject matter. Likewise, in *L'amour* (fig. 3), the addition of clouds through a photographic printmaking process that uses bromoil adds a somewhat distracting, painterly effect of realism to a highly contrived scene in which a salivating Gorilla looms over a semi-nude woman.

²²⁸ Lytle and Moynihan 103.

²²⁹ Lytle and Moynihan 278.

²³⁰ Lytle and Moynihan 63.



Left: Fig. 2. *Untitled (Incubus variation 1)*, ca. 1926



Right: Fig. 3. *L'amour*, ca. 1935

While Mortensen strove to elevate photography from mere mechanical reproduction to a craft requiring the skill and expertise making it worthy of the name of “art,” in most cases, the subject matter or aesthetic effect remained so exaggerated and artificial that his photographs appear to anticipate Sontag’s “Notes on Camp” essay by three decades. While he was serious about his craft—publishing numerous works on photographic technique—Mortensen dismissed accepted taste with photographic styles ranging from the zany to the pornographic. Perhaps this is why the photographer was largely written out of the history books despite his prominence in photographic circles. Compared to the seriousness of Ansel Adam’s straight photography, Mortensen’s grotesques are laughably camp in how they appropriate the cinematic philosophy of Hollywood to photography. It is in this sense that Mortensen will prove an invaluable touchstone to articulating the relationship between West’s grotesque camp sensibility and the just social world it seems to caricature.

Underlying Mortensen's photographs is the notion of a *pictorial imperative*—or, in his words, “the command to look.” Although his photographs demonstrate that he possessed a great (if not camp) sense of humor (fig. 4), Mortensen certainly thought himself, like Tod, a serious artist, one who struggled against his critics to prove he definitely had talent. Only a photograph that made an “impact” on a viewer was worthy of being called a “picture”—in the double sense of achieving the status of painting and adapting the techniques of cinema—and accordingly, he left many negatives undeveloped in his quest for perfection. If staring, as Rosemarie Garland-Thomson describes, “is an ocular response to what we don’t expect to see,” then for Mortensen, a “picture” possesses some aesthetic or thematic quality that *compels* the viewer to look at it, sometimes despite the offensive nature of its content.²³¹ Taking direct inspiration from Cecil B. DeMille, who “used to say that there were just four elements needed in a motion picture to ensure its success with the public....sex, sentiment, religion and sport,” Mortensen argued that “pictures” fell into one or some combination of the following categories: sex, sentiment, and wonder.²³² (Notably, the last category, “wonder,” is Mortensen’s own invention, and it almost exclusively accounts for all of his grotesque images.) Thus, adapting cinema’s discourse for his own purposes, Mortensen’s photography reflects a showman’s awareness of manipulating the gaze of a potential audience. What is more, his approach to selecting a photographic subject was not unlike the Zeuxis-esque operation of Faye choosing a card from her deck of ideas and then having Tod fill in the blanks. As one scholar describes, “Once [Mortensen] decided upon the image that he felt best suited to his idea, he set to work using his various methods of control, much as an artist might use Photoshop today. In this way he was essentially creating a new

²³¹ Garland-Thomson 3.

²³² Mortensen, *Command* 54.

image that derived partly from the photograph and partly from his imagination.”²³³ The uncanny effect of Mortensen’s photographs stemmed from the way they undermined the mimetic function of photography: instead of *veracity*, he favored *expression*. “The final concern of art is not with facts,” he wrote, “but with ideas and emotions.”²³⁴



Fig. 4. *The Quest for Pure Form* (Self-Portrait), ca. 1940

Crucially and counterintuitively, then, Mortensen resists the way that the photographic has typically been read into West’s work by critics such as Barnard and Veitch, who, influenced by the Frankfurt School, draw parallels from photography’s mechanical reproduction to mass-culture in capitalist society. Other critics like Strychacz and, more recently, James Goodman in *Modern American Grotesque: Literature and Photography* have discussed how photography in West’s work fits into broader artistic and cultural contexts in the twentieth century.²³⁵ In

²³³ Lytle and Moynihan 63.

²³⁴ Lytle and Moynihan 128.

²³⁵ Goodwin deserves particular mention since his study *Modern American Grotesque: Literature and Photography* devotes a chapter to West. Throughout the project, Goodwin relies on a definition from Kenneth Burke that describes the grotesque as “incongruity *without* the

contrast to these and other accounts, Mortensen provides a compelling critical departure, because his grotesque camp sensibility offers a self-consciously *superficial* stance toward photography that bucks the prevailing artistic pretensions of the art form. We need look no further than Sontag's *On Photography* to learn that "[t]he history of photography could be recapitulated as the struggle between two different imperatives: beautification...and truth-telling...."²³⁶ Sontag also importantly identifies an underlying mimetic relationship of photography to reality. "Surrealism lies at the heart of the photographic enterprise," she writes, "in the very creation of a duplicate world, of a *reality in the second degree*, narrower but more dramatic than the one perceived by natural vision. *The less doctored, the less patently crafted, the more naive—the more authoritative the photograph was likely to be.*"²³⁷ Despite Sontag's valuable articulation of camp, her description of photography appears as postmodern as it does old-fashioned, reproducing ancient and romantic appeals to beauty's relationship to truth and, implicitly, to goodness. Most notably, she harkens back to an age-old perspective on ugliness that I describe in this project's Introduction—namely, Aristotle, who inaugurates a mimetic tradition that renders ugly subjects beautiful through their artistic depiction. Noting photography's privileged relationship to the mimetic and to the idealization of the beautiful nevertheless allows us to see how Mortensen undermines photography's relationship to beauty

laughter" (89, emphasis in original). As I argue, laughter (or, more generally, the comic) is essential to West's thinking, and a definition such as Burke's would seem to repress the comic underpinnings of the grotesque itself. Also noteworthy is the fact that Goodwin repeatedly cites A. D. Coleman's *The Grotesque in Photography*, which not only features Mortensen's photography but also serves as a stepping stone for Coleman's work to rewrite Mortensen into the history books. See Goodwin, as well as Coleman's essay "Conspicuous by his Absence: Concerning the Mysterious Disappearance of William Mortensen" (in Lytle and Moynihan, pp. 273–87).

²³⁶ Sontag, *On Photography* 86. It is worth observing that Sontag's essay, "America Seen Through Photographs, Darkly," briefly compares Diane Arbus's biography with West's.

²³⁷ Sontag, *On Photography* 52.

and to the real through humdrum technique. In his view, every photograph is *composed*—just to varying degrees and stylizations. In this sense, each and every photograph is as superficial as any of the staged photographic stills in *The Day of the Locust*; what transforms a photograph into a picture is precisely the Zeuxis-like skill with which a photographer fabricates new forms while remaining self-conscious of their artifice. Thus, instead of the rudimentary realism that Faye achieved when pitching script ideas with Tod, Mortensen’s precise manipulation of details overwhelms his viewers with pure fantasy.



Left: Fig. 5. *The Possessed*, ca. 1926



Right: Fig. 6. *Shrapnel*, ca. 1928

Posing his models and stylizing his images to the point of undermining their artistic genre—are they photographs, illustrations, paintings, or prints?—Mortensen often achieves a grotesque camp effect of calling into question the relationship between art and life, between reality and artifice, and, doing so, ridicules photography’s propensity to redeem ugly subjects with a kind of secondary “inner” beauty. In an essay suggestively entitled, “The Heroism of Vision,” Sontag suggestively argues that ugliness is entirely foreign to photographs. “Nobody

ever discovered ugliness through photographs...” she writes. “Nobody exclaims, ‘Isn’t that ugly! I must take a photograph of it.’ Even if someone did say that, all it would mean is: ‘I find that ugly thing...beautiful.’”²³⁸ And yet when looking at Mortensen’s grotesques, the photographic negative becomes the playground for ugliness as the *aesthetic negative* of beauty. By the prevailing tastes of their time and place, it is highly unlikely that photographs with ugly subjects, such as *The Possessed* (fig. 5), or those with uglifying darkroom techniques, like the collage of *Shrapnel* (fig. 6), would have been redeemed as “beautiful.” In simple terms, these estranging photographs foreground their difference before making demands for their acceptance. Although Sontag observes that “[p]hotographs create the beautiful and—over generations of picture-taking—use it up,” it seems unlikely that such photographs might help to *expand* a definition of beauty rather than *refute* one.²³⁹ The grotesque for Mortensen was powerful precisely because it was transgressive, because it could command the viewer to look at things that might otherwise be repellent or distasteful. Certainly, these photographs do not resemble the standard glamor shots of stars solicited by Hollywood studios, even if they make use of similar techniques or strategies. In such grotesque images, the photographic negative almost becomes the basis for an alternative aesthetics of ugliness, either exaggerating monstrosity through unrecognizable caricature or disfiguring the human body into an uncanny and hybrid Zeuxis-esque montage.

²³⁸ Sontag, *On Photography* 85.

²³⁹ Sontag, *On Photography* 85.

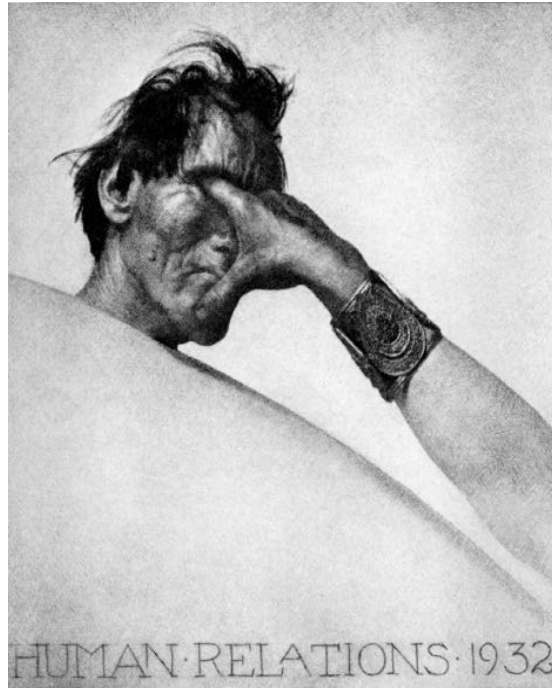


Fig. 7. *Human Relations*, 1932

One of Mortensen's most famous grotesque images, *Human Relations* (fig. 7), presents a striking composition that not only expresses the photographer's "command to look" but also doubles as a lens to understand how the culture industry structures relations in the social world presented in *The Day of the Locust*. In the photograph, the fingers of an outstretched arm poke both eyes of a man's weather-beaten, disembodied head. The grotesqueness of *Human Relations* arises from the radical incongruity of what Mortensen describes as "the savagery of the action" with the numb indifference of the face under assault.²⁴⁰ Compounding this unfeeling brutality is the symbolic register of a burlesque tradition that invokes the "idiomatic pain" that we previously saw remains central to West's vision of the American Scene. In an essay entitled "Nathanael West's Burlesque Comedy," Jay Martin cites a list by comedians describing situations guaranteed to get laughs from audiences. The first on the list: "When a man sticks one finger into another man's eye." The second: "When a man sticks two fingers into another

²⁴⁰ Mortensen, *Command* 148.

man's eye."²⁴¹ In *Human Relations*, it is almost as if blinded, hapless Lemuel Pitkin has aged into a bedraggled Harry Greener, as if the viewer herself has become implicated as an audience member to one of their violent stage acts. In this sense, the photograph contaminates human relations, presenting a scene of cruelty that cannot be stopped but is instead only ever voyeuristically proliferated with each viewer.

When considering the Hollywood context of West's novel and of Mortensen's photographs, one artistic detail in *Human Relations* should give us pause: the costume jewelry worn on the offending arm. Appearing in several other photographs by Mortensen, the piece was almost certainly taken from his time at the Western Costume Company and reflects a finer point about how human relations are entangled with the Hollywood machine. If the outstretched arm, nearly naked yet costumed nonetheless, represents the seductive glamour of Hollywood, then the wrinkled and shriveled head can arguably be read as a stand-in for West's glamor-seeking Midwesterners. As the screenwriter Claude Estee tells Tod: "It's good, but it won't film. You've got to remember your audience. What about the barber in Purdue? He's been cutting hair all day and he's tired....What the barber wants is amour and glamor" (256). In this sense, *Human Relations* pierces through the fabricated "amour and glamor" of Hollywood, warning the viewer that their vision—and feeling—may be usurped. And, in fact, they already have: the underlying brutality of the photograph is rebuffed by the comic absurdity of it being one of Mortensen's "trick" images. Even posed and highly stylized with darkroom techniques, *Human Relations* still does not *look* like an actual photograph. This very fact should elicit the viewer's wonder, both at the artist's skill and conceptual sadism—that the artist *chose* to devote their talent to depicting an act of slapstick cruelty. In this sense, Mortensen is perfectly aligned

²⁴¹ Martin 6.

with what one critic has described as West's "comic anti-humanism."²⁴² As with Mortensen's command to look, West creates characters that compel fascination despite their same capacity to solicit the reader's moral reprehension at their actions.

Just as Mortensen affects a grotesque camp through his photographs, West does so through his artist-characters, who, as largely unsuccessful creators and "failed humans," run counter to the prevailing tastes of their respective art forms. Although Tod admits that "Faye did have some critical ability," she cannot discern good taste from bad (292); she is described as "an actress who had learned from *bad* models in a *bad* school" (292, emphasis added). Meanwhile, Tod, for his own part, rejects the "mere handsomeness" cultivated by his supposedly superior Yale training for a niche interest in grotesque Old Masters. Furthermore, it does not require explanation that Harry's death symbolizes the cultural irrelevance of vaudeville. Yet West's competing artist-characters all seek the same thing: an audience to affirm their talent. As Mortensen writes, "[T]here is one fundamental thing that a picture-maker always expects of his picture—that it will be looked at. *He who makes a picture always assumes a public that looks at pictures.*"²⁴³ Whether in a moving picture, a painted picture, or a picture-perfect performance, artistry implicates a wider field of social relations (i.e., others) for it to effectively command-to-look. But alongside West's characters, Mortensen reveals how the distinction between part and whole, fantasy and reality, and, finally, art and life, has become farcical. For, the line between them becomes blurred by competing claims on the barber in Purdue, who may very well be synonymous with what Mortensen called "the eye of the average beholder."

²⁴² Nieland 79.

²⁴³ Mortensen, *Command* 37.

The Laughing Angel of Hollywood

With Mortensen's photographs circulating at the time *The Day of the Locust* was written and published, we can, by way of conclusion, cast better light on two of West's most infamous ruminations about the picture business of Hollywood. The first comes when, immediately after finding new artistic idols in Old Masters of the grotesque, Tod leaves the film studio and sees the dream-machinery of Hollywood strewn about in a ten-acre field that is part graveyard, part junkyard.

In the center of the field was a gigantic pile of sets, flats and props. While he watched, a ten-ton truck added another load to it. This was the final dumping ground. He thought of Janvier's "Sargasso Sea." Just as that imaginary body of water was a history of civilization in the form of a marine junkyard, the studio lot was one in the form of a dream dump. A Sargasso of the imagination! And the dump grew continually, for *there wasn't a dream afloat somewhere which wouldn't sooner or later turn up on it, having first been made photographic* by plaster, canvas, lath and paint. Many boats sink and never reach the Sargasso, but no dream ever entirely disappears. Somewhere it troubles some unfortunate person and some day, when that person has been sufficiently troubled, it will be reproduced on the lot. (326, emphasis added)

If, as Mortensen suggests, the photographer should become like a director, then West shows here how Hollywood anticipates the photographic command to look and, in the process, seeming renders the notion of aesthetic judgment moot. Recalling the Mortensen's discarded and undeveloped negatives, the "dream dump" that Tod sees is essentially a trash heap of fantasies made "photographic" or picture-ready by the studios. Unlike the Western Costume Company, which would essentially repurpose props for new productions or would supply Mortensen with dramatic artistic details for his photographs, West's dream dump represents pure waste associated with fabricating the superficial. Or, to put it another way: the dream dump represents the dumping ground for the bodies leftover once Zeuxis has selected the fairest part of each model. Here, too, is where the ideas from Faye's pack of cards go once they have been fleshed out—and played out—with the help of artist-fabricators like Tod.

As he looks upon the dream dump with fascinated revulsion, Tod parallels Walter Benjamin's influential description of the Angel of History, an angel enraptured by the growing "rubble-heap" of the past. Like Tod, the angel "looks as though he were about to distance himself from something which he is staring at," with Benjamin adding, "His eyes are opened wide, his mouth stands open and his wings are outstretched."²⁴⁴ Windswept by the storm of "progress," the angel cannot look away toward Paradise. Instead, the mounting catastrophes of history command him to stare in exasperation, mouth agape. Unlike Benjamin, however, there is no messianic philosophy of redemption with West and no ultimate possibility of progress in *The Day of the Locust*. As Steven Weisenburger has argued, the novel consists of a structuring dialectic of growth *and* decline, of progress *and* regression.²⁴⁵ In a grotesque camp reading, Tod is something like the Angel of Hollywood, but *without* Benjamin's romantic "melancholic gaze."²⁴⁶ With West, there is no redemption, only laughter. In the dream dump, parts do not add up to a coherent whole but, rather, lay bare the illogic of doing so.

Failure to redeem the disposable fantasies of the Hollywood dream dump even extends to the showy and rather camp landscape of Los Angeles, the City of Angels, which itself resembles a studio lot. "[Th]e ugly, hump-backed hills...were *almost beautiful*," Tod muses. "But not even the soft wash of dusk could help the houses. Only dynamite would be of any use against the Mexican ranch houses, Samoan huts, Mediterranean villas, Egyptian and Japanese temples, Swiss chalets, Tudor cottages, and every possible combination of these styles that lined the slopes of the canyon" (243, emphasis added). Here, the seemingly photographic effect of dusk lighting almost—but not quite—renders beautiful the comic ugliness of the jumbled assortment

²⁴⁴ Benjamin 257.

²⁴⁵ See Weisenburger.

²⁴⁶ I borrow this Benjaminian phrase from Veitch, who, in turn, derives it from Peter Bürger. See Veitch, "Reading Hollywood" p. 221n35.

of architectural styles. What is implicitly grotesque about this description is how the boundary between ugliness and beauty is nearly blurred, even if the line between them is insurmountable. Only in Hollywood, Tod seems to imply, could special effects cast the illusion of beauty onto ugliness. And yet, here, the artifice of the Hollywood landscape remains legible because the various architectural details fail to cohere as a composite whole. Although Tod admits soon after that it is easier “to sigh” than “to laugh at the need for beauty and romance, no matter how tasteless, even horrible, the results of that are,” the novel’s final scene reveals this sentiment to be a joke (243). For, Hollywood’s “almost beautiful” landscape will make for “a great bonfire of architectural styles” in his own unrealized artistic masterpiece (387).

Tod’s artistic breakthrough for “The Burning of Los Angeles” occurs during the outbreak of a violent mob at a film premiere, a mob triggered when Faye’s admirer, Homer Simpson, snaps at the taunts of brattish child-actor Adore Loomis and stomps him to death. As Tod suggests when he happens upon the people at the premiere, the crowd is so overdosed on fantasy that it leaps at the opportunity to release a repressed urge for violence. Swarming at the promise of seeing Hollywood stars on the red carpet, the crowd is almost entirely composed of “The Cheated,” the phrase West intended to be the original title of *The Day of the Locust*. Betrayed by fantasies seen in film and reinforced in newspapers, they feed “on lynchings, murder, sex crimes, explosions, wrecks, love nests, fires, miracles, revolutions, wars. This daily diet made sophisticates of them....Nothing can ever be violent enough to make taut their slack minds and bodies. They have been cheated and betrayed. They have slaved and saved for nothing” (381). Similar to Tod’s desire to rape Faye, the crowd’s fantasies—maintained by Hollywood’s command to look and to consume, but not to touch—become psychologically unbearable and collectively unsustainable. They want to hoard fantasy, to feel it in their grasp, even if this means destroying it in the process, like Homer being torn asunder by the mob.

Despite the malicious tone of Tod's observations about the crowd before it becomes a mob, views from inside the squashed tangle of bodies reveal a perversely convivial outlook. Some members cheerfully speculate that the uproar was caused by a celebrity sighting gone amok while others are rather blasé about revealing it all started when "[a] pervert attacked a child" (386). Seemingly to kill time when the mob comes to a standstill and they cannot move, some of its members recall, almost jovially, a story of Zeuxis-esque violence that is the epitome of West's grotesque camp.

"I come from St. Louis," announced [a] stout woman, "and we had one of them pervert fellers in our neighborhood once. He ripped up a girl with a pair of scissors."

"He must have been crazy," said the man in the cap. "What kind of fun is that?"

Everybody laughed. The stout woman spoke to the man who was hugging her.

"Hey, you," she said. "I ain't no pillow."

The man smiled beatifically but didn't move. She *laughed*, making no effort to get out of his embrace.

"A fresh guy," she said.

The other woman laughed.

"Yeah," she said, "this is a regular free-for-all."

The man in the cap and sweater thought there was *another laugh* in his comment about the pervert.

"Ripping up a girl with scissors. That's the wrong tool."

He was right. *They laughed even louder than the first time.*

"You'd a done it different, eh, kid?" said a young man with a kidney-shaped head and waxed mustaches.

The two women laughed. This encouraged the man in the cap and he reached over and pinched the stout woman's friend. She squealed.

"Lay off that," she said *good-naturedly*.

"I was shoved," he said.

(386–7, emphasis added)

As with "the savagery of the action" that described Mortensen's *Human Relations*, here the good-natured laughter of the crowd is in radical incongruity with the unfathomable violence that starts the mob and that fuels the tale of the girl "ripped up" with scissors. It is not the content of the story—which, like Zeuxis, figuratively renders a body into pieces—but, rather, its telling

that adds a grotesquely camp sense of humor to the scene. For, if camp is generally “too much,” here excessive violence notably elicits excessive cheer. As West reflected in “Some Notes on Violence,” “In America violence is idiomatic. Read our newspapers. To make the front page a murderer has to use his imagination, he also has to use a particularly hideous instrument....Only liberality and symmetry could [make] this daily occurrence interesting.”²⁴⁷ Perhaps the way violence, a social phenomenon, takes on the aesthetic terminology of “liberality and symmetry,” explains the comic effect of the tale being told. If we understand the girl ripped up with scissors as an extreme idiom of the violence of the American Scene—after all, the scissors become a particularly hideous instrument when one man jokes they are “the wrong tool”—then West again presents a grotesque camp scene in which Zeuxis-esque violence—here, the uglifying disfigurement of the body—yields dark humor exposing the absurdity a just social world. As with Lemuel Pitkin’s dismantling and sudden death on stage in *A Cool Million*, the mob’s conflation of violence with entertainment is the symptom of the breakdown of that world. While some of its members may join it for just reasons, the very existence of the mob already represents a mass instance of cruel optimism.²⁴⁸ The Hollywood command to look that would normally sustain a single person’s frustrated desire for beauty can no longer be held at bay when the masses appear at a film premiere; collective grief culminates in a violent frenzy that satiates previously repressed desires. Arguably, the laughter of this scene suggests the crowd’s relief with its own absurd condition.

Notably, West’s belief in the “liberality and symmetry” of violence, after describing its ugly—and uglifying—effects, would seem to invoke classical and romantic definitions of the beautiful, which often evoke sublimity and ordered compositions that subsume parts into

²⁴⁷ NW 399, emphasis added.

²⁴⁸ See Berlant.

wholes. However, if *The Day of the Locust* is characterized by a grotesque camp sensibility, then West likely has a different idea in mind. If camp unsettles conventional frameworks of aesthetic judgment, then the grotesquerie of the girl being ripped up with scissors stems from the “liberality and symmetry” between numbness and gratuitous emotion.²⁴⁹ Such cognitive dissonance manifests in members of the mob *laughing* at the girl’s dramatic disfigurement and possible death. On the one hand, these people are drawn to the film premiere in the first place for a chance to see stars, to see beauty in the flesh. On the other hand, they glamorize theatrical acts of violence that leave ugliness in their wake, grotesque spectacles worthy of the front page of the newspaper. Although the mob forms when an act of moral outrage occurs (a pervert attacking child), West’s secondhand account of the girl being ripped up with scissors—arguably so horrible that it happens off stage and *out of sight*—suggests, like Mortensen’s *Human Relations*, that the vision and emotional compass of the average American have been usurped by the culture industry. It is impossible for the barber in Purdue to see where the boundaries between reality and fantasy, between life and art, reside, and as a result, violence ensues.

Just as Mortensen’s photographs undermine the mimetic and artistic pretensions of photography, Tod’s artistic breakthrough, immediately after overhearing the story of the girl being attacked with scissors, comes at a moment when the distinction between life and art appears its thinnest. Despite the agony of a leg injured when he was swept up by the mob, Tod “was able to think clearly about his picture” (387). Clinging for life to a nearby iron rail, his overall vision for “The Burning of Los Angeles” comes into focus.

[H]e could see all the rough charcoal strokes with which he had blocked it out on the big canvas....Through the center, winding from left to right, was a long hill street and down it, spilling into the middle foreground, came the mob carrying baseball bats and torches....a great united front of screwballs and

²⁴⁹ Nieland likewise describes vaudeville in terms of an affective short-circuit. See Nieland, esp. p. 66.

screwboxes to purify the land. No longer bored, they sang and danced joyously in the red light of the flames. (387–8)

What was a blocked-out canvas of charcoal strokes is given a precise level of aesthetic detail as Tod becomes so inspired by what he sees that he imagines himself “work[ing] at the flames in an upper corner of the canvas” (388). Although “The Burning of Los Angeles” frustrated Tod before this moment and had yet to be fully realized, he transfigures the agonizing pain in his leg into an artistic vision reflecting the idiomatic violence that West saw in American culture more broadly.

The final scene of *The Day of the Locust* is thus the ultimate spectacle of West’s grotesque camp: it is the uncanny effect of life imitating art, commanding the reader to continue on despite the exaggerated violence unleashed by the deceptive optics of Hollywood’s camera’s eye. Perhaps the most fitting way to conclude, then, is to briefly observe two directorial choices made in the same scene as depicted in John Schlesinger’s incredibly camp 1975 film adaptation of West’s novel. The first comes when Tod clings to a car in agony as a searchlight (ever the symbol of Hollywood’s command to look) shines into his face. Suddenly calm, Tod (played by William Atherton) surveys the riot and flames that surround him, mentally piecing together details of “The Burning of Los Angeles” from the various studies he has drawn throughout the film. Schlesinger intersperses shots of Tod’s cartoons (fig. 8) between members of the mob until the two essentially fuse: the faces of rioters are suddenly covered by a canvas-like material that dramatically obscures their features with paint (fig. 9). While each mask differs from individual to individual, they share the same disturbing and crudely drawn features: where there should be eyes, there are twin black voids, and often where there should be a mouth is an abyss. If the mob forms from a crowd that has been seduced by the fantasies of Hollywood, then it is fitting that they have been figuratively robbed of their sight, blinded by the command to look. Thus,

as Tod's hallucinations blur the distinction between fantasy and reality, it likewise blurs the respective social consequences of either category as the ensuing frenzy becomes eye-for-an-eye.

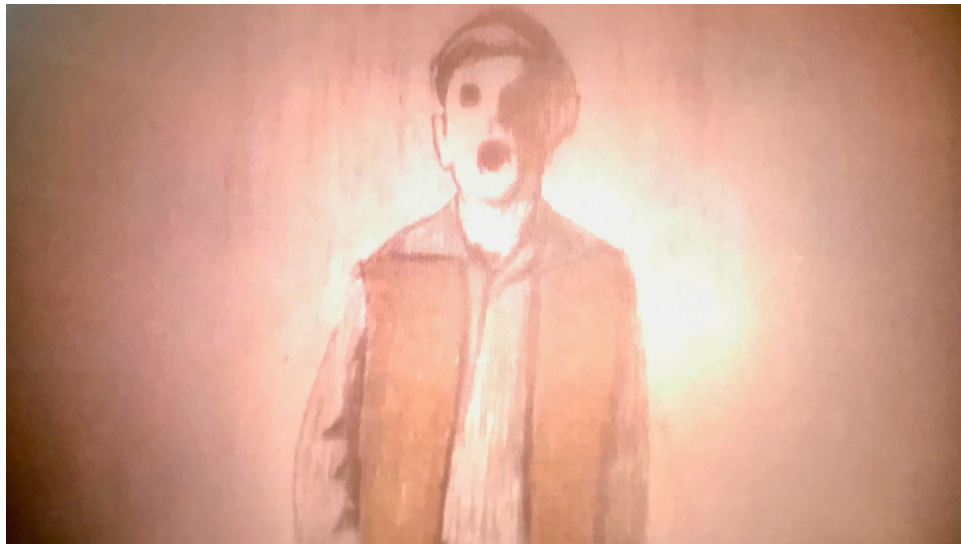


Fig. 8. One of Tod's cartoon studies for "The Burning of Los Angeles"

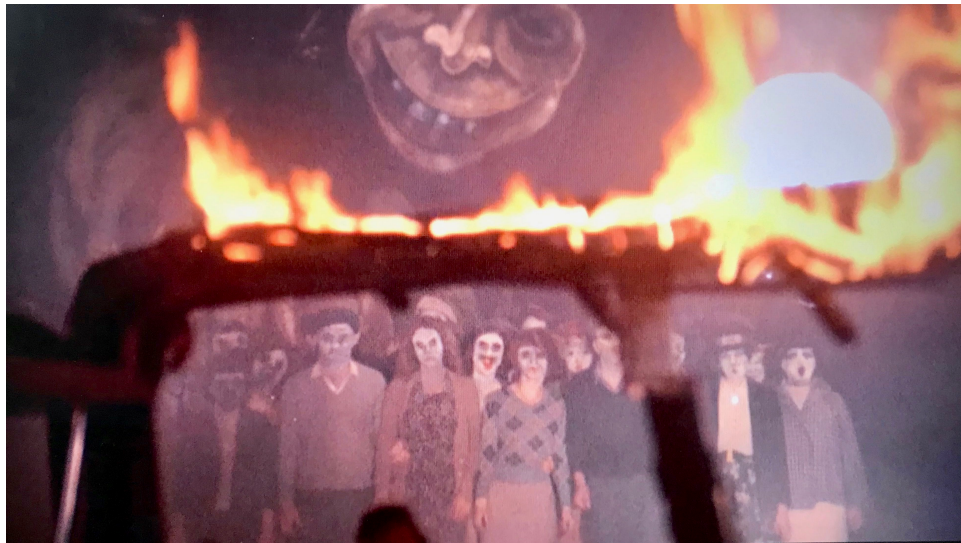


Fig. 9. The mob transformed

In a film that is largely faithful in its adaptation of the novel, Schlesinger's decision to have the mob quite literally imitate Tod's art is striking, and it serves as an apt bookend to discussing West's grotesque camp sensibility. Amid the glitzy context of the film premiere, the jarring and roughly rendered faces of the mob nicely reflect what one critic has referred to as

“West’s anti-sentimental sense of humor.”²⁵⁰ When Hollywood cannot deliver on its promises, when it can no longer beautify the world with its camera, a grotesque human comedy ensues that *uglifies* everything in its wake. Like Bakhtin’s notion of the carnivalesque, the distinction between life and art is both reaffirmed and undone by the spectacular breakdown of determined boundaries and socially constituted bodies.²⁵¹ Indeed, there is the sense that if violence remains unchecked, the mob will inevitably render itself into a horrific, Zeuxis-esque collection of body parts. As if realizing the crowd’s monstrous desire for beauty, Tod, still above the unfolding violence, begins to scream in agony. Shortly thereafter, the camera cuts from his grotesque, gaping mouth to a burning photograph of Faye (Karen Black) that she gave to Tod earlier in the film (fig. 10). Like the Tarzan photograph that inspired her script ideas, Faye’s own photograph not only reflects a movie idea that has already played out, adding more detritus to the Hollywood dream dump. However, its destruction also gestures, like the spectacular deaths of Lemuel Pitkin on stage or the girl being ripped up with scissors, to the human toll of fantasy, to what lies beyond Hollywood’s ceaseless obsession with exaggeration and artifice, in a nation grappling with extreme economic depression.

²⁵⁰ Nieland 58.

²⁵¹ Indeed, one might read the final scene of *The Day of the Locust* as a carnivalesque crowd, which Bakhtin describes as “not merely a crowd. It is the people as a whole, but organized in their own way, the way of the people. It is outside of and contrary to all existing forms of the coercive socioeconomic and political organization, which is suspended for the time of the festivity” (255).



Fig. 10. Tod's autographed film still of Faye burning



Fig. 11. Faye entering Tod's empty apartment

However, if we understand West as a grotesquely camp Zeuxis of ugliness, as a *laughing* Angel of Hollywood that uses the grotesqueries of camp to make the violence of the American Scene speak for itself, then Schlesinger strangely obscures this socially inflected reading with a striking omission that arguably certainly makes the novel more palatable as a Hollywood film. In the novel, Tod is so overwhelmed by the violence of the mob that, when police cars arrive on the scene, he begins to “laugh and...to imitate the siren as loud as he could” (389). Though this is the last line in the novel, the film omits West’s authorial choice of laughter, opting instead to

show Tod stunned and mute against a lamp post until the film cuts to Faye entering Tod's empty apartment on a sunny day, undoubtedly after the film premiere (fig. 11). As the camera zooms to a close-up of her face and sunshine streams forth from behind her, Faye's expression changes from one over-affected emotion to another, finishing with a sentimental smile that undoubtedly contrasts with the previous scene in which Tod was crying out in agony. While Tod's implied departure from the San Bernardino Arms might suggest he has also left Hollywood, it also gives the impression that he may have died in the mob violence of the preceding scene. Either way, to omit Tod's laughter perhaps does an injustice to West's grotesque camp sensibility as the *laughing* Angel of Hollywood. For, it may very well erase the novel's final joke: although Zeuxis died laughing at one of his own hideous paintings, the novel's final punchline is to ask how Tod might live with his own. And yet, perhaps this is the very success of Schlesinger's film: it invents a final artistic setting for Faye when Tod is incapable of realizing his own. The ultimate figure of West's grotesque camp, she becomes a superfluous detail in the film, whereas Tod was unable to integrate her into his unrealized masterpiece, even when it seemingly comes to life.

CODA

Ugly Americanism

William Lederer and Eugene Burdick's bestselling political novel *The Ugly American* (1958) provides a useful point of conclusion to this project, a study of ugliness in which the question of politics has slid in and out of view.²⁵² Set in the fictional Southeast Asian kingdom of Sarkhan, the novel presents a series of interrelated narratives that tell the story of an unfolding political crisis whereby an impoverished kingdom drifts into the orbit of Communism. As the novel depicts the failures of the U.S. diplomatic corps to contain the spread of competing ideologies, it also critiques an inherently social kind of ugliness that stems from American insulation and insensitivity to the realities of life in other cultures. As one character reflects, "A mysterious change seems to come over Americans when they go to a foreign land. They isolate themselves socially. They live pretentiously. They're loud and ostentatious. Perhaps they're frightened and defensive; or maybe they're not properly trained and make mistakes out of ignorance" (145). It is precisely deliberate ignorance of other cultures that leads to increasing anti-American sentiment in Southeast Asia, approaching a political state of "double resistance" such as we saw in Chapter 1. If *The Ugly American* may be viewed through the lens of the orchard scene from the opening of *The Making of Americans*, then the United States is the old man struggling to hang on as he is being dragged along, while Sarkhan is the angry young man

²⁵² Lederer was a former U.S. Navy captain and Burdick was a political scientist.

struggling to break free from his father even as he attempts to overthrow him. There is, as Stein would say, an inherent ugliness in American-Sarkhanese relations.

While the title of *The Ugly American* has come to be associated with the stereotype of distasteful American behavior abroad, the titular Ugly American is a far cry from the majority of Foreign Service workers more invested in the cocktail circuit than in advancing American-Sarkhanese relations. Indeed, the supposedly ugly Homer Atkins is not even a member of the diplomatic corps. Atkins puts his engineer's hands to work fabricating infrastructure and realizing building plans for political higher-ups, "princes of bureaucracy [who] were the same all over the world" (205). In contrast to these "fashionably dressed men" that call the shots on the ground, Homer is humbled by "[h]is hands [which] always reminded him that he was an ugly man" (205). As the title of *The Ugly American* suggests, the ugliness of Homer's hands is central to the novel's political critique.

His hands were laced with prominent veins and spotted with big, liverish freckles. His fingernails were black with grease. His fingers bore the tiny nicks and scars of a lifetime of practical engineering. The palms of his hands were calloused. Homer Atkins was worth three million dollars, every dime of which he had earned by his own efforts; but he was most proud and confident of his ugly strong hands. Atkins knew that he could always make a living with them.

(206)

Although, like Homer Simpson in *The Day of the Locust*, the Ugly American feels the burden of his hands, he nevertheless knows their value and acknowledges their productive capacity. Yet, as the above passage suggests, with the exception of "prominent veins" and "liverish freckles," their ugliness appears to be less innate than acquired, the product of "a lifetime of practical engineering." In this sense, while Homer is self-conscious of how his hands may be seen in the eyes of others, he also transfigures their ugliness into a kind of virtue. His hand may be ugly, but they are uglified in the pursuit of hard work and in the service of deeply held values. What is more, as one of the most perceptive characters in the novel, Homer seemingly transcends his

label as “The Ugly American” by understanding the needs of the Sarkhanese better than the diplomatic corps with which he works as a contractor. Arguing with bureaucrats that the Sarkhanese need food, not big industry, he speaks out; however, no one takes him seriously, in part, because of his disregard for appearances. “Atkins was aware of the fact that he was the only man in the room not wearing a tie. In fact, he was wearing a rough khaki shirt, khaki pants, and old Marine field boots. He still had the smell of the jungle about him; the other men, Vietnamese, French, or American, all smelled of aftershave lotion” (206). That Homer confidently knows his worth and does little to mitigate his ugliness when facing superficial bureaucrats raises the following question of the novel: Who is the *real* Ugly American of Lederer and Burdick’s story? Is it the character who happens to be ugly in his person, or is it one of the many political agents that are characterized, in more cynical and troubling terms, by their apathy to the suffering that surrounds them?

As Ela Przybylo and Sara Rodrigues argue in their introduction to *On the Politics of Ugliness*, the ugly is political in at least two respects. “[F]irst, it denotes inequalities and hierarchies, often serving as a repository for all that is ‘other’ and despised; second, it is contingent and relational, taking shape through the comparison and evaluation of bodies” (14). They add: “[T]o mark another being as ‘ugly’ is to make a commentary that is at its heart caught up in the mechanisms not only of the politics of appearance but also in racism, sexism, ableism, fatphobia, ageism, and capitalist attachments to perfectible and optimizable bodies” (16). Dismissing what they describe as the “fetishization of ugliness in the contemporary moment, which has its origins in modern art,” Przybylo and Rodrigues argue that the politics of ugliness perpetuates a regime of *visual injustice* in “which ugliness operates to discriminate as well as render and deny privilege and access to resources” (12, 17).

While Homer Atkins's hands certainly symbolize visual injustice in the broad sense that he is denied affiliation with a community of his peers (he is essentially an outsider among American ex-pats in Sarkhan), they also pose an interesting challenge to Przybylo and Rodrigues's articulation of a politics of ugliness. As suggested above, the ugliness of his hands is largely acquired through his industriousness and maintained through his self-presentation. Furthermore, his description of his hands' virtues provides a connection to manual labor long praised in American ideology. In this sense, Homer's embrace of his ugly hands is an acknowledgment of his labor power and his capacity to enact change as an independent agent. Indeed, later in the novel, he even abandons working for the U.S. Government to help the Sarkhanese produce desperately needed water pumps.

More importantly, Homer's ugly hands appear to push against what Przybylo and Rodrigues describe as a fetishization of the ugly that supposedly begins with the aesthetic ideas of modern art I have examined in previous chapters. In the first place, although *The Ugly American* presents itself as a critical exposé of the hypocrisy and inadequacy of the American diplomatic corps, its invention of a fictional cultural "other"—the imagined kingdom of Sarkhan—is consistent with Edward W. Said's observation that, long before modernism, "Orientalism responded more to the culture that produced it than to its putative object, which was also produced by the West."²⁵³ In the novel, Orientalism is, ironically, often conveyed by well-intentioned characters.²⁵⁴ For example, O.S.S. agent John Colvin, who forges some of the most meaningful ties with the Sarkhanese by learning their language and culture, nevertheless

²⁵³ Said 22.

²⁵⁴ The 1963 film, starring Marlon Brando, opens with the following disclaimer, which arguably reinforces the orientalist fantasy it would seem to dismiss: "We are grateful to the people and the tourist organization of Thailand where much of this picture was filmed. *The events portrayed, while drawn from history, do not reflect the politics or history of Thailand*" (emphasis added).

describes them in terms that are markedly othered: "They were small, delicate people, their skins a lovely shade of brown, all of their motions graceful and restrained. Even people of the meanest caste had a dignity and charm which impressed Colvin enormously" (20). For the minor character Tom Knox, however, language evoking the "enchantment" of an exoticized Far East lures him to do agricultural work in Cambodia:

When he was a small boy, Tom had discovered that certain words meant enchantment to him. Words like "cinnamon," or "saffron," or "Malacca Straits," or "Hindu" or "Zamboanga" had magic in them. They suggested strange countries, mysterious reaches of green water, smells that he had never yet smelled, and people he had never yet seen. Later, when he learned what the words meant, he wanted to see the places and things for which the words stood. As he grew older he collected other words and stored them deep in his mind. "Raffles Hotel," "monsoon season," "upland plantations," "mahogany forests," "rice paddies," "Yellow River," — hundreds of names of places and objects of the Far East. (159–60)

If Orientalism, following Said, is "a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient," then why does *The Ugly American*, a novel explicitly *critical* of American domination of the Far East, make such appeals?²⁵⁵

The counterintuitive Orientalism of *The Ugly American* challenges Przybylo and Rodrigues's definition of the politics of ugliness, I argue, because the text takes the conventional formulation of ugliness as a feature of the colonized and turns it back onto the colonizer. In doing so, it uses the ugly as a complex literary tool to challenge state politics rather than simply fetishizing it. Indeed, while the novel asks who is the *real* Ugly American among Lederer and Burdick's cast of characters, undoubtedly, the true protagonist of the novel is the American nation-state, which looms ever-present as the yardstick for the actions of all players. In this sense, Said's definition of Orientalism is spot-on, not only to describe the Western gaze through which certain characters view the East but also to describe the way a fictional Orient serves as

²⁵⁵ Said 3.

a mirror for America to view itself and to imagine the impact of its actions abroad. The narrative and political strategies of *The Ugly American* conscientiously wage a powerful moral critique of American Imperialism, one that ended up having a direct impact on American foreign policy. The novel sold more than 5 million copies and stirred up controversy during the 76 weeks it spent on the bestseller list. Its moralizing portrayal of how American politics are ruthlessly yet ineffectively conducted around the world was so successful that the U.S. Government attempted to suppress sales of the book abroad and to influence the production of the 1963 film adaptation.²⁵⁶ The novel was openly dismissed by then-Vice President Nixon and by then-Senator J. William Fulbright, who declared on the floor of the U.S. Senate, “It occurs to me that for a writer nothing is easier, nor more rewarding commercially, than ridiculing institutions and professional groups.”²⁵⁷ Nevertheless, the novel was credited with inciting a dramatic reorganization of foreign aid and even with President Kennedy’s founding of the Peace Corps in 1961.²⁵⁸

In this sense, the ugliness at the heart of *The Ugly American* is not a simple fetishization of ugliness such as Przybylo and Rodrigues describe but a politicization of the idea of ugliness as essentially American. Less like the modernist cult of ugliness championed by Ezra Pound, the novel’s emphasis on the ugliness of ideology is more akin to the subversive caricatures of Carl Van Vechten and Rudolph Fisher and perhaps like the brutal spectacles of Nathanael West in the senseless violence it suggests is on the horizon. While fetishization, as Przybylo and Rodrigues certainly underscore, can be problematic—indeed, although *The Ugly American* is a creature of its time, it is an incredibly “naive and outdated” novel by today’s cultural standards—

²⁵⁶ Meyer, n.p. In 1965, Lederer and Burdick published a sequel to *The Ugly American* called *Sarkhan*, which was later retitled *The Deceptive American*.

²⁵⁷ Fulbright 8.

²⁵⁸ Runde, n.p.; McDuffee. n.p.

it can still be a vector for productive political discourse. As *The Ugly American* simultaneously depicts Homer as uglified by his labor and morally upstanding for upholding his values, readers sympathize with him seemingly *despite* his physical ugliness, and he becomes an ethical foil for other characters in the novel. While his hands are imbued with a political purpose in the novel, raising questions of power, authority, and responsibility, the 1963 film notably downplays their significance by making Homer a minor character. Jettisoning an emphasis on literal ugliness, it arguably does so to underscore a larger, more explicitly political form of ugliness that transcends any single character. This sentiment is conveyed in the film's final scene in which a television broadcast is turned off by a distracted suburban viewer at the precise moment it urges Americans to care about places like Sarkhan. Indeed, because of America's involvement on the global political scene, it suggests we have all become Ugly Americans.

As I have argued throughout this study, ugliness has remained a surprisingly capacious category for writers and artists to render their visions of the American Scene, this despite the ugly's longstanding *negative* definition as the *not*-beautiful. I conclude by reflecting on this definition in light of *The Ugly American's* depiction of the expansion of American life, beyond America's borders, into a larger, global scene. To borrow a phrase from Said, the broader theme of this project, *Ugly Americanism*, has involved projecting a culturally specific and artistically idiosyncratic "style of thought" onto the world, ensuring conflicts ensue when others inevitably enter the loop.²⁵⁹ In this sense, the writers and artists I have examined throughout this project were creative thinkers who stylized their visions of American life to the point of "getting ugly" with their audiences; such styles of thought were provocations centered on the generative dimension of ugliness. The uglification of *The Making of Americans* through formlessness,

²⁵⁹ Said 2.

disfiguration, and incorrectness challenged readers' subjectivity and even the Gertrude Stein's authorship, becoming the means for the narrator to tell her own suppressed story of Americanization. For Carl Van Vechten and Rudolph Fisher, offensive racial caricatures of black primitivism and black progress were vectors for a timely critical discourse about the oppressive effects of life under the color line. Finally, for Nathanael West, the camera's eye perpetuated the culture industry's untenable fantasies, inevitably stoking violence when they failed to deliver on their promises. Although such creative works come a long way from Henry James's gilded vision of the American Scene at the turn of the twentieth century, they suggest an enduring cultural politics at work in taking appearances for granted.

From the aesthetic to the embodied to the social, this project has explored the three most potent dimensions of ugliness within the American Scene, approaching the subject mainly from the question of style and culture. *The Ugly American* extends a sentiment expressed by James when he referred, in 1904, to the railroad's expansion throughout America as giving rise to "our ugly era."²⁶⁰ The rise of the American Century depicted in *The Ugly American* reveals how American involvement across the globe has resulted in numerous political building projects—dams, highways, and irrigation systems built by men like Homer Atkins. Such projects not only make places like Sarkhan more profitable for America, but they also physically alter the landscape into a singular global vision of progress, projecting a schematic vision of the American Scene abroad. Although it is not my place in a dissertation on literary studies to wade into waters of globalization, it is worth observing that its undertone of Americanization suggests a whole new sentiment to the ugliness of our own era, the twenty-first century. Just as the idea of the Ugly American has trickled down from literature to popular culture and has an abiding

²⁶⁰ James, *The American Scene* 118. Emphasis in original.

idea across media that never seems to disappear, the *Ugly Americanism* of projecting styles of thought onto the world has ensured a world increasingly marked by conflict. As writers and authors continue to grapple with the aesthetic, physical, social, and political conditions of ugliness in the world, one wonders what new cultural sensibilities will inevitably emerge.

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