

THE MODERN AMERICAN NETWORK NARRATIVE

By

WESLEY WILLIAM BEAL

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To Courtney and Charley

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Wesley William Beal

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The basic argument of “The Modern American Network Narrative” is that American modernism is characterized by a dialectical tension between homogeneity and dispersal, totality and fragmentation, and that these polarities are mediated by the figure of the network. Accordingly, I consider the network the defining figure of modernist aesthetics—and especially modernist narrative.

Chapters on Jean Toomer’s *Cane*, Anita Loos’s *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, John Dos Passos’s *U.S.A.* trilogy, and Nathanael West’s *The Day of the Locust* demonstrate the different kinds of networks that are at play in modernism: networks of people, networks of technology and commodities, and, perhaps most importantly, networks of form. This reappraisal of modernism challenges the conventional wisdom that networks are the prevailing social metaphor for contemporary times, only recently having replaced the melting pot as the dominant metaphor for issues of globalization and the digital age, and providing a framework for the network narrative genre that is often associated with contemporary films like *Crash*, *Syriana*, and *Babel*. By arguing that American modernists also used networks to represent their milieu, I argue that these

later network discourses actually signal a residual trace of the cultural logic of modernism.

The bulk of the project is to excavate the kinds of networked representation that thrived during modernism and to consider what those lost modes of network thinking indicate about American culture during the modern period. How might modernists use networks to articulate their milieu differently than we use networks today? And how might abandoned modernist conceptions of networks provide an archaeology of possibilities for the network? The central conclusions I have reached from such prompts are twofold. First, I recover the diverse networked aesthetics that typified the modern period but are relatively undeveloped today. Second, I argue that contemporary manifestations of networks are suggestive of a nostalgia for modernism—particularly its vibrant public culture.

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

During the 2006-2007 television season, ABC ran an ill-fated primetime drama named *6°*. Created by power-producer J.J. Abrams, the program aired irregularly and scored poor ratings before being terminated after a mere 13 episodes without even a chance for a series finale. The title fairly signals the plot, which follows six primary characters from various walks of life as their paths cross, converge, and entangle on the streets of Manhattan. The cast of characters includes a struggling defense attorney, a young woman looking for a fresh start in New York City, the widow of an embedded journalist who was killed in Iraq, a gambling addict and chauffeur, a successful PR executive on the verge of marriage, and a father separated from his family who is trying to piece things back together. Each narrative becomes entangled with the others, framing the figures as nodes on a network, a human web of interdependence that bridges class, race, and gender to bring all of Manhattan into closer kinship. Indeed, this multicultural, didactic element was explicitly encouraged in promotions that aired during the short run of the series. “There is a theory that anyone on the planet can be connected to any other person through a chain of six people. Any of them could be the one that changes your life forever,” proclaimed one spot in a bid for the program’s multicultural underpinnings.

6° banks on a now-familiar strategy of narrativizing the six-degrees-of-separation formula. Popularized in a spate of 1990s and 2000s films—*Short Cuts* (1993), *71 Fragments* (1994), *Magnolia* (1999), *Amores Perros* (2000), *Traffic* (2000), *21 Grams* (2004), *Crash* (2005), *Syriana* (2006), and *Babel* (2006), to name but a few of the

Western examples¹—and even in Abrams’s *Lost* series (2004-2010), this mode of narration tends to assemble networks of characters along two planes: first, by demonstrating their physical connectedness, signaled by scenes wherein characters unknowingly cross paths on the street or conduct some kind of fleeting business or social transaction; and second, by establishing shared themes that loosely tie the characters together—like existential agony in *Magnolia*, racial discrimination in *Crash*, or fate and agency in *Lost*. In both cases, it is the reader who recognizes the networking of the characters, never the figures themselves. Recognizing the shared conventions of these texts, scholars like David Bordwell have codified them as a supposedly new genre: the network narrative.

One might say that after such a profusion of six-degrees texts, the banality of this narrative formula is what finally doomed *6°*, which seemed to offer no intervention beyond this organizational staple. What interests me about *6°*, however, is not its ultimate failure, but how it signals two key assumptions widely held about the figure of the network. For the network is generally accepted as the defining figure of an intellectual history that spans only the last 30 years or so, acting as a metaphor to describe the advances of the digital revolution as well as the flows of capital and information in the age of globalization. And while the network’s role as a literary trope is also generally confined to this period, its function as a literary device is often restricted to the use of the six-degrees theorem. This project challenges both of these assumptions about the network by establishing it as a key organizational figure in modernist intellectual production, and by showing how modernist narratives operate on

¹ The bibliography of David Bordwell’s “Mutual Friends and Chronologies of Chance” catalogues some 150 international films, mostly from the 1990s and 2000s, that follow this model.

networked models in ways that broaden the generic classifications that confine the network narrative to the six-degrees formula. Moreover, the moderns' use of networked representational models indicates how the network provided them with a conceptual tool for grappling with the dramatic transformations of their milieu.

To discuss American modernism in terms of networked dynamics may seem like the work of anachronism or presentism, as the network is the dominant figural metaphor for our contemporary moment of digitization and globalization, but I think that an emphasis on networks in modernist scholarship will help align our understanding of the projects of modernism more closely with the way that modernists were trying to think their own world. The cultural logic of modernism lies in the dialectical movement of two polarities that often present scholars with interpretative difficulty. In the intellectual production of the modern period, this dialectic is expressed in the tension between homogeneity and dispersal, polarities that defined a host of the period's social, economic, and technological developments. And in the scholarship of modernist aesthetics, this dialectic is most often articulated as a tension between totalization and the fragment, the two most basic tendencies of high modernism. This cultural logic holds in global modernisms, but especially in American modernism, where experiments in the paradoxes of totalization and fragmentation performed especially important work to rethink the meaning of national space and national belonging in response to seismic shifts in the nation's demographic makeup, and to refigurations of the center and the periphery wrought by technological innovations such as the radio and by ever-evolving systems of global trade. Scholars have often struggled to deal with these dialectical polarities, and I think that the figure of the network neatly mediates this dialectical

tension, negotiating the competing visions of dispersal and unity into a system that accommodates both via its nodal, interconnective configuration. For these reasons, “The Modern American Network Narrative” positions the network as the defining figure of American modernism, and explores its use as a conceptual tool that American moderns relied on to think the changing American landscape.

Networks In The Modern Period

It is with good reason that the network is associated with the intellectual production of postmodernity and the age of globalization. A great proportion of intellectual output over the last 30 years, both in theory and in criticism, has operated on various forms of networked configurations. Poststructural theorists Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980) advances a theory of the rhizome, that strange body that operates on “principles of connection and heterogeneity” so that “any point of a rhizome can be connected to anything other, and must be” (7). Multiculturalists of the 1990s like Charles Taylor and Kwame Anthony Appiah implicitly discuss networked systems predicated on values of recognition, conversation, and cosmopolitan neighborliness. Sociologist Manuel Castells has written in *The Rise of the Network Society* (1996) that with informational capitalism there is an “organizational logic” that itself renders “the logic of the network [...] more powerful than the powers in the network” (208). Anthropologist Arjun Appadurai’s *Modernity at Large* (1996) establishes a proliferation of neighborhoods into “virtual neighborhoods,” akin to the social networking utilities that have come to prominence on the internet in recent years. Marxist theorists Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, often drawing of the work of Deleuze and Guattari, have theorized in *The Multitude* (2004) that “the multitude too might thus be conceived as a network: an open and expansive network in which all differences can be expressed

freely and equally, a network that provides the means of encounter so that we can work and live in common” (xiv). Sociologist and proponent of Actor-Network-Theory (ANT) Bruno Latour has written in *Reassembling the Social* (2005) that a “network is an expression to check how much energy, movement, and specificity our own reports are able to capture. Network is a concept, not a thing out there. It is a tool to help describe something, not what is being described” (131). And these networked configurations also appear in more popular outlets. For example, *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman discusses globalization in his bestsellers *The Lexus and the Olive Tree* (1999) and *The World is Flat* (2005), both of which draw heavily on the ideational model of networks—using humanistic networks as a solution for international problems of human rights, and discussing how disenfranchised groups like Al-Qaeda use networked organization to combat the networks of global power they protest.

Reading this genealogy of work, one might assume that the late twentieth-century proliferation of network models would be directly tied to the onset of the digital revolution—just as one might assume that the adoption of machinic language and ideational models would follow the industrial revolution. Important theorists of digital media and hypertextuality—one thinks of Michael Joyce, George P. Landow, and Stuart Moulthrop, to name but a few—have borne out the strong relationship between networked discourse and the scholarship of the digital age. But to infer that the use of the network as a conceptual or representational tool spawned autochthonously somewhere around 1980 signals a high degree of amnesia for much of the work that came earlier in the century.

Social psychologist Stanley Milgram, for example, famously tested the span of interpersonal networks in his “small world experiment” of the mid-1960s. Milgram found that by using a chain of about six mediators, beginning with a known contact, a person in Omaha or Wichita could deliver a letter to an unknown person in Boston if given only the stranger’s name, address, and occupation. The experiment’s results were not overwhelming: only 26% of the chains were fully completed, and even those findings have been challenged as less than empirically sound. Nonetheless, Milgram remains a prominent figure in network thinking and especially in popular conceptions of networks—as indicated by Abrams’s *6°*, which explicitly narrates the theorem Milgram popularized, or his heavily network-structured *Lost* series, which relies heavily on the six-degrees narrative formula, and in which Milgram looms vaguely, maybe menacingly in the background in the DHARMA Initiative that eerily evokes Milgram’s famous obedience experiments.

Biographer Thomas Blass credits Milgram with more-or-less single-handedly introducing the six-degrees theorem to the American public by arguing that John Guare’s play *Six Degrees of Separation* (1990) drew solely on Milgram’s model (284). The 1993 film version, starring Stockard Channing, Will Smith, and Donald Sutherland, employs a linear narrative—not a six-degrees organization, contrary to what the title might suggest—and it was widely celebrated, leading to an Academy Award for Best Actress for Channing. And that film inspired the “six degrees of Kevin Bacon” game that debuted as a sketch on M.T.V.’s *Jon Stewart Show* in 1994—a game that still enjoys popularity as pastime among movie buffs and the bored—which further underscores Milgram’s popular legacy in network thinking. Blass acknowledges that the M.I.T.

political scientist Ithiel de Sola Pool and I.B.M. mathematician Manfred Kochen had already been working on a theoretical model to investigate the six-degrees theorem (145), but he positions Milgram as the central figure in bringing the six-degrees theorem to prominence. That claim may well hold in terms of public consciousness, as Milgram's penchant for the dramatic experiment earned him popular recognition. When he finally published the findings of the small-world experiment in 1967, Milgram chose *Psychology Today* as the venue, opting for a wider readership than he would have found with scientific journals. Milgram deserves much of the credit for popularizing this particular network scheme, but to locate him as the founder of network thinking would be a disservice to other networked models in American culture that came before him during the modern period.²

The changing social, economic, demographic, and technological situations during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries called for new models of thinking about the world, and these models very often took the shape of networks. Marconi's famed transatlantic transmission in 1901 signaled the onset of global wireless communications, requiring new ways to think about the local, the global, and the interrelationship of the

² Even Walt Disney Corp's iconic theme park ride "it's a small world", which many would assume to be derivative of Milgram's "small world experiment", predates Milgram's work. According to Stephen Fjellman, "the original 'it's a small world' was created at the behest of the Pepsi-Cola Company for the 1964-1965 New York World's Fair" (274). And so the ride easily predates the 1967 publication of Milgram's small-world research. After the World's Fair closed, the ride was moved to Disneyland, the park in Anaheim, California that had opened in 1955, and it appears in the Disney parks in Orlando, Tokyo, Paris, and Hong Kong. Opened in 1971, the variant that tourists find in Disney World's Magic Kingdom in Orlando consists of six rooms that customers observe via boat on an artificial canal—the entire circuit being scored to continuous play of the ride's famous eponymous song. Each room displays a chorus of harmonious animatronic children and features a regionalized theme with heavy ethnic accents: western Europe, Asia, Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean, the Pacific, and finally a grand synthesis of the preceding rooms in what Fjellman describes as "a kind of Disney United Nations" (275). The circuitous experience of the ride, along with the cosmopolitan intermingling of the "Disney United Nations" room, performs a global network that comports with the ride's multicultural undertones—a project one might also read in the ride's replication in Tokyo, Paris, and Hong Kong.

two. The steady advance of urbanization forced people, especially in the U.S., to reconceive the boundaries and shapes of community, the interrelationships of center and periphery, and the meanings of pluralism and regionalism. The expansion of American cities, paired with advances in electric lighting and public transportation, facilitated a public culture that led people to reexamine social interrelationships in the new “era of the crowds.” The increased mobility of the period brought over twenty million European immigrants—many were non-Protestants and were considered people of color—to the U.S., demanding reconceptualization of the nation’s identity. The destabilization of global trade that followed World War I reconfigured trading partnerships, and accordingly prompted new understandings of markets and neighbors, commodities and strangers.

The radio offers a case study the modernist dialectic of centralization and dispersal. At the turn of the century, the airwaves were a mess of conflicting signals. Radio enthusiasts were free to choose their own frequencies, could transmit as far as their wattage allowed, and were not restricted to any regular scheduling that listeners could reliably tune in to. The result was an outright cacophony of overlapping signals. The airwaves were so chaotic that transmissions detailing such important news as the sinking of the *Titanic* and the ensuing rescue efforts were routinely interrupted by competing signals. This situation provides two illustrations of the dialectic of unity and dispersion. On the one hand, it was becoming clear that radio technology itself, which had long been intended for point-to-point communications between two parties on the model of the telegraph or telephone, simply was not cooperating with the objective of perfectly linear transmissions. This was demonstrated during the interference of *Titanic*

transmissions, and later with transmissions during World War I, which military leaders could not trust to be received confidentially by a single targeted audience in the field. By the 1920s, broadcasting, the multivalent scattering of signals across the airwaves to a widely dispersed audience, was understood to be radio's fundamental purpose, displacing presumptions about its role as a device of linear, centrally controlled communications. On the other hand, the untenable chaos of the airwaves called for a series of regulatory reforms, begun by the Radio Act of 1912, which began to articulate the airwaves as the domain of federal government instead of individual radio enthusiasts. Anthony Rudel explains the tension that arose as then-Secretary of Commerce Herbert Hoover led efforts to license stations and delegate them to specific frequencies: "Hobbyists interested in using the airwaves to converse with one another and listen to signals from distant places were in direct conflict with the companies that were heavily invested in the technology and saw the new medium as a way to reach as many people as possible" (50). The social space of the radio, too, staged this dialectical tension, as governmental and corporate interests aimed to make the chaotic airwaves safe for commerce, while individual radio enthusiasts wanted to preserve the public element of free radio transmissions.

By November of 1928, with the help of the Radio Act of 1927, the regulatory campaign finally achieved the reallocations of frequencies and wattage limits, rendering the nation a fixed system of radio broadcasting. Through the 1920s, the explosive growth of radio programming and the widening of broadcast ranges were reflected in the wild expansion of the listening audience: in 1922, there were an estimated 60,000 radio sets in American homes, and by 1929, that number had ballooned to around 7.5

million (Rudel 105). The full coverage of the nation's radio waves, paired with the aggressive expansion of ownership of radio sets that would continue into the Depression years, made radio broadcasts a central feature of the national space. With the aid of relay networks established by corporate interests, people could hear broadcasts from across the nation, detailing news of national and regional importance. WGN, for example had broadcast the Scopes Trial in 1925—the first live coverage of its kind—with the *Chicago Tribune* trumpeting the broadcasts as “a demonstration of the public service of radio in communicating to the masses great news events” (Larson 142). Throughout the 1920s, broadcasts of election results became a national pastime, with restaurants and even prisons organizing events around the radio coverage (Rudel 120-21). Such coverage mixed national returns and local returns so that listeners became familiar with not only their own local results, but also the local results being broadcast from distant stations. The network of lines and radio signals that made such broadcasts possible in turn created a network of listeners who were beginning to think of their national space in just a framework.

The modernist conditions of network thinking are rooted not only in the period's technological, social, and economic developments, but also in the ideological and epistemological revolutions that typified the milieu. The recognition of Einstein's theory of relativity, for example, required new means of thinking about the relationship of space and time. And the nascent field of anthropology, once an arm of colonial expansion, strove to assuage anxieties about Western culture and overturn theories of scientific racism by emphasizing a cosmopolitan appreciation for global cultural diversity, challenging provincial values of nation and identity. The advent of labor management

and discipline pioneered by Frederick Winslow Taylor and Henry Ford redistributed the linear, sequential flow of production in a traditional factory into coordinated divisions of labor, forcing people to rethink the organization of the workplace, and accordingly broader paradigms of social organization. Across these various fields we see the beginnings of a revolt against conventional chains of space, people, and work, and with the credibility of those old models deteriorating, a new organizational model would be needed to order the world.

One of the moderns who began to articulate such a new organizational figure was Randolph Bourne. Bourne, the public intellectual and vocal opponent of the U.S.'s entry into World War I, concisely illustrates how networked dynamics were beginning to be recognized, if only implicitly, even in the 1910s. In "Trans-National America," published in *Atlantic Monthly* in July 1916, Bourne pronounces the failure of the melting pot—a failure that had been in the offing well before the war began, but that was more or less completed as the Great War took Europe and threw the U.S. into a disarray of divided national loyalties. Bourne describes the entrenchment of "national clusters": "as they became more and more firmly established and more and more prosperous, [they began] to cultivate more and more assiduously the literatures and cultural traditions of their homelands" (108). Bourne writes that the failure of an Americanism predicated on assimilation "demands a clear and general readjustment of our attitude and our ideal," and he is quick to point out that this readjustment does not signal the total abandonment of what Americans believed about themselves: to recognize the failure of the melting pot scheme "is not, however, to admit the failure of Americanization. It is not to fear the failure of democracy. It is rather to urge us to an investigation of what Americanism

may rightly mean” (108). It signaled, in other words, the need to redefine the U.S.’s dichotomous impulses—to conceive of the national identity as a homogeneous whole or as a disarray of fractured communities—through a new figural model.

The model that Bourne would propose is one that we recognize as a network today, though he did not precisely articulate it in such terms. To replace the failed metaphor of the melting pot, Bourne offered a new schema for thinking the nation: a “federation of cultures” comprised of all the various national clusters that refuse assimilation (115). Bourne’s federation links together all the disparate national clusters, transforming the nation into a network comprised of all the nodal communities of shared identity. This federation of cultures—not the unified, homogenous melting pot—would be “the great American democratic experiment,” he wrote (Bourne 117). Like the defunct figure of the melting pot, Bourne’s networked model is based on assimilation. But the directional quality of that assimilation process is radically different in the two models. Bourne explains, “As long as we thought of Americanism in terms of the ‘melting-pot,’ our American cultural tradition lay in the past. It was something to which the Americans were to be moulded [sic]. In the light of our changing ideal of Americanism, we must perpetuate the paradox that our American cultural tradition lies in the future” (115). In other words, with the melting pot the common bond is a narrowly defined Anglo-Saxon tradition to which new entrants must conform. In Bourne’s networked configuration of the federation of cultures, on the other hand, new entrants and new cultures have all the legitimacy of the nativist WASPs. Where the melting pot assimilates one into a static tradition, the federation of cultures adapts and mutates with each newly assimilated individual and culture. In re-imagining the U.S. with such a

hegemonic networked model, Bourne releases the nation from the inert melting pot and theorizes its flexible adaptability as an ever-dynamic network.

Bourne believed that this federations model would be successful enough in the U.S. to be shared as a global model of conflict deterrence. He writes, “In a world which has dreamed of internationalism, we find that we have all unawares been building up the first international nation” and continues to argue that the U.S. has achieved “a cosmopolitan federation of national colonies, of foreign cultures, from whom the sting of devastating competition has been removed. America is already the world-federation in miniature” (Bourne 117). A note of American exceptionalism may ring in that description of the U.S.’s leadership of the international sphere, but Bourne’s cosmopolitan enthusiasm is irrepressible. He concludes his article with internationalist euphoria: “America is coming to be, not a nationality but a trans-nationality, a weaving back and forth, with the other lands, of many threads of all sizes and colors” (Bourne 121). That Bourne rests the hopes of the nation’s future—indeed, the hopes for world peace—on a networked model is a clear marker of the network’s emerging importance as a conceptual tool during the modern period.

Had Bourne lived into the 1920s, he may have revised his “federation of cultures” thesis or at least critiqued the backlash against his cosmopolitan vision. By the 20s, it was widely understood among intellectuals that the particular mode of assimilation figured by the melting pot had failed. Bourne had company in ringing the bell for the melting pot in Horace Kallen’s “Democracy Versus the Melting-Pot” (1915), and Henry Pratt Fairchild’s *The Melting-Pot Mistake* (1926), both of which corroborated the decline of the symbol of unified national identity. But the turn to a nativist strand of

Americanism during the 1920s—pursued under the slogan “One Hundred Percent Americanism” coined, perhaps inadvertently, by Theodore Roosevelt in 1915—sealed off any chance for Bourne’s utopian network to thrive. In a speech in St. Paul, Minnesota in 1919, President Wilson tried to scapegoat immigrants for his inability to lead Congress to ratify the Treaty of Versailles, saying, “the most un-American thing in the world is a hyphen” (Goldberg 24). And that xenophobic sentiment became policy with the 1924 National Origins Act that hardened immigration quotas in order to favor “desirable” white immigrants while curtailing the immigration of Eastern Europeans and Asians. In this political climate, the “national clusters” Bourne identified as disrupting the assimilation of the melting pot simply withered on the vine—and Bourne’s “federation of cultures” thesis wasted away with them.

In a way, it is unsurprising that Wilson would rebuff the hyphen—the fundamental building block of Bourne’s federations model—because Wilson’s appeal to Americanism is aligned with one of the familiar polarities of the cultural logic of modernism. Despite calls for the abandonment of the melting-pot metaphor, the allure of a homogenized national identity carried a strong appeal for many, partly out of nostalgia for some mythical past of an undifferentiated community, and partly out of refusal to relinquish the authority of Anglo-Saxon formations of race and culture. This debate has typically been read as an opposition of provincialism and cosmopolitanism, but the different models of organization that Wilson and Bourne rely on are informative of the ideational models that were at play during the modern period. Neither is willing to abandon a sense of national belonging to an entropic type of dispersal that would destroy the U.S.’s imagined community. But Wilson’s conservative appeal—exactly what Bourne wrote

against when he explained the old model of Americanism was “something to which the Americans were to be moulded”—clung to a monolithic national identity that was increasingly untenable in praxis. Wilson’s anti-hyphenate rhetoric, then, is symptomatic of the dialectic of modernism, and is part of the intellectual tradition that Bourne and others were working to mediate with networked models for the nation.

While Bourne’s discursive solution failed to solve the material problems of immigration and national identity or completely overcome the older principles of a homogeneous Americanism, its networked contours were beginning to take hold among other intellectuals of the era. The leading figures of Young America, a consortium of urban intellectuals that included Bourne, Van Wyck Brooks, Waldo Frank, Lewis Mumford, and others, were invested in reimagining the social configuration of the United States, and found this figuration useful. Mark Whalan characterizes the group’s common project as a commitment “to developing models of inclusive cultural nationalism” (8)—a project that is evident in Bourne’s “Trans-National America” and also in Frank’s *Our America*, published in 1919. *Our America*, a product of exchanges of cultural envoys between the U.S. and France during World War I, takes up the work of defining American culture to a foreign audience and strives to displace the traditional centrality of Puritan inheritance and to articulate anew American culture as it is perceived by “the younger generation”—the “our” of the title. Frank grants the U.S. a Whitmanian note of multitudinousness: “America is a complex of myriad lights playing upon myriad planes [...] Its reality is but a sprawling continent—mountains and gardenland and desert—swarmed by a sprawling congeries of people. To bound it is to stifle it, to give it a definite character is to emasculate it, to offer it a specific voice is to

strike it dumb” (8). To articulate this multitudinous cultural conglomerate, Frank draws loosely upon networked configuration.

Frank’s articulation of an America for the young redraws the nation’s cultural genealogy, replacing the monolithic legacy of Puritan New England with a network of cultural centers. He locates a host of cultural situations that work together as an inclusive, organic “Whole” of America. Frank’s cultural centers gesture toward the diversity of American cultural inheritance, spanning the spatial, ethnic, literary, and generational dimensions of American cultural diversity. He provides close study of New England, the Native American southwest, Chicago, and New York, as well as the contributions of Jewish Americans, Whitman, and the young generation to the multivalent constitution of American culture. Susan Hegeman characterizes Frank’s spatial-cultural diagramming as a schema “for imagining the transformation of American culture—from one of alienation and incompleteness to something approximating completion and organic integrity: what Frank himself liked to refer to as a ‘Whole’” (*Patterns* 104). In coordinating this diverse range of sources into his vision of a “Whole,” Frank’s rendering of America rejects the linearity that would draw a straight, uninterrupted line from the Puritans to twentieth-century America. Instead, Frank achieves a networked vision of American culture by drawing a connective web of America’s disparately threaded cultural legacies—a figuration similar to Bourne’s “federation” of national clusters.

What is important for us to take away from “Trans-National America” and *Our America* is not Bourne’s failure to position a “trans-national America” as the immediate figural successor to the melting pot, or Frank’s failure to completely displace the linearity

of the traditional cultural model of the U.S. Instead, Bourne and Frank are noteworthy in their recognition that the network would prove to be a valuable tool in reconceptualizing the U.S. in light of the major shifts of the period. They signal, in other words, the breaking of the ground in the network's deployment as an ideational model—not its apotheosis as the dominant figural metaphor, which would begin with the discourses of globalization and the digital revolution in the 1980s. Nevertheless, Bourne's use of the network to redefine American national identity and ethnic affiliation, like Frank's use of it to reconceive of American culture, indicates the important work to which network figuration was assigned during the modern period. And while neither Bourne nor Frank deploy the language or vocabulary of networks as we recognize those discourses today, they both work on similar problematics, defining America and American culture according to a constellar aggregate of diverse "national clusters" and centers of culture. Even without articulating these models as networks, Bourne and Frank signal the network's importance as an ideational model for modern intellectuals.

While Bourne, Frank, and others were developing the ideational model of networks, networks were also being put into practice as an organizational principle in many fields of modern American society, complementing work like "Trans-National America" and *Our America* as another mode of intellectual history. The corporation provides one case study in the rise of network models during the period, familiarizing many with networked organization through their lived experience of the rapidly changing workplace. The traditional wisdom on the development of the corporation is that during the modern period its organization was strictly hierarchical, monolithic, centralized. Conversely, sociologist Manuel Castells demonstrates how contemporary corporations

are typically held up as examples of the networked formations of the postmodern, global era: “multinational corporations are increasingly decentralized internal networks, organized in semi-autonomous units, according to countries, markets, processes, and products. Each one of these units links up with other semi-autonomous units of other multinationals, in the form or *ad hoc* strategic alliances” (122). Castells is right to associate this fluidly networked mode of corporate organization with the late twentieth-century advent of the multinational, but even within the modern period we see American corporations taking on the organizational model Castells identifies in their descendants a few decades later.

The Modern Corporation and Private Property (1932), the foundational study of corporate governance by Adolph Berle and Gardiner Means, measures some of the stakes of these nascent developments in corporate organization. The central argument of the book is that corporations have eroded the traditional institution of private property with a system of “multiple ownership.” Berle and Means contend that the corporation’s signal intervention is the separation of owning stockholders from the managerial control of the corporations: “No longer are the individuals in control of most of these companies, the dominant owners. Rather, there are no dominant owners, and control is maintained in large measure apart from ownership” (117). This phenomenon creates a paradox, as the increased dispersal of stock ownership results in the increased centralization of power by corporate managers. This consolidation of power—by managers, and by corporate firms generally—was a major concern during the modern period. Matthew Josephson’s *The Robber Barons* (1934), for example, studies the consolidation of wealth through the paths of captains of industry such as Andrew

Carnegie, Pierpont Morgan, John D. Rockefeller, Cornelius Vanderbilt, and others whose corporate firms heavily influenced the American economy—so much so that they nearly constituted an oligarchy. Josephson laments the centralization of corporate power, writing that when these men entered history “the United States was a mercantile-agrarian democracy. When they departed or retired from active life, it was something else: a unified industrial society, the effective economic control of which was lodged in the hands of a hierarchy” (vii). Fears of the modern corporation’s centralizing powers had already brought about the Clayton Act of 1914, a piece of anti-trust legislation that prohibited inter-firm dealings that could lessen competition in the markets.

But the Clayton Act itself demonstrates the role the modern corporation played in the emergence of the figure of the network. As Mark Mizruchi puts it, the primary goal of the legislation was to outlaw “interlocks between competing companies within particular industries” (99). In other words, while the centralizing power of a single corporation was worrisome, the potential for multiple firms to interconnect and expand their sphere of influence demanded regulation. Mizruchi ultimately finds that the Clayton Act had little impact on inter-corporation networking, but its very passage demonstrates awareness that it was not only the centralizing force of the corporation, but also the power of networked corporations that would require regulatory attention.³

³ Mizruchi’s data shows that inter-corporation interlocks increased in number from 1904 to 1912, but declined from 1912 to 1935. He suggests that “what began around 1912 was a trend which would have occurred irrespective of the Clayton Act” (183). Instead, he explains the declining numbers by pointing to an accompanying decline of “heavily interlocked individuals” (184). In other words, as figures like E.H. Harriman, John D. Rockefeller, J.P. Morgan, Sr., and others—figures Josephson would identify as “robber barons”—died or reached retirement, the interlocking links between corporations often expired with them.

In response to atomizing legislation like the Clayton Act and the ever-present imperative to grow, the modern corporation began a process of internal diversification—the expansion of operations to house new, often unrelated projects within the same firm, acting as the inverse of outsourcing—to sidestep the limits placed on interlocking relationships. Jon Didrichsen locates this development in the 1920s, which saw the onset of “the large, diversified, multi-divisional firm in the United States. In the years which have passed since that decade, the strategy of diversification rather than that of integration, and the multi-divisional as opposed to the functional organization have become dominant characteristics of many large firms in American industry” (38). In Didrichsen’s account, a firm that diversified to expand its profits would meet challenges with the myriad technologies, manufacturing demands, distribution channels, and managerial exigencies of the new line, and this resulted in the decentralized, multi-divisional model of organization that typifies the multinational (39). This organizational process, he writes, “was pioneered by Du Pont and General Motors in the 1920’s and was soon accepted by firms in the chemical, motor vehicle, and electrical industries” (Didrichsen 39). The rippling effects later spread to “processors of agricultural products and the oil and rubber industries,” but the fully networked conglomerate did not arrive until the early 1950s (Didrichsen 39-40).

Again, radio provides a case study for this organizational model. The Radio Corporation of America (RCA) was formed in 1919 by the General Electric Company (GE) at the behest of the Navy Department, which was concerned about the British-owned Marconi Company of America’s administration of U.S. airwaves (Rudel 23). GE, presumably, was the logical choice for this acquisition because of its deep pockets and

its expertise in electronics. The link between radio production and radio broadcasting is of course only nominal, but throughout the 1920s, it provided a model followed by many other firms—the Westinghouse Electric Company, the Crosley Manufacturing Company, Love Electric, and others—that established and bought up radio stations across the country with the goal of building demand for the products they were already manufacturing (Rudel 31, 63-67). When these companies' dominion of the airwaves was seen to verge on restraint of trade, the National Broadcasting Company (NBC) was created in 1926, owned 50% by RCA, 30% by GE, and 20% by Westinghouse (Rudel 93). Now separated into autonomous firms, GE and RCA took on responsibilities in addition to their original missions of manufacturing and broadcasting to include the unfamiliar work of entertainment programming.⁴ Through the mediating link of NBC, GE and RCA demonstrate two levels of networks in the corporate organization of the modern period: on the one hand, they are formally separate firms involved in internal diversification, but on the other hand, their mutual entanglement places them in an external network of corporate interests.

Where the corporation of the late twentieth century is fully networked internally and externally, as Castells describes it, the corporation of the modern era presents a paradox of centralized and networked organization, reflecting the modern period's dialectic of unity and dispersal. The development of Du Pont during the modern period is another telling case study. On the one hand, Du Pont exercised a high degree of

⁴ This seemingly arbitrary project of diversification is behind a running joke on NBC's sitcom *30 Rock* (2006-present), set mostly in the GE building on Rockefeller Plaza where NBC Studios are headquartered. GE executive Jack Donaghy (Alec Baldwin) carries the title of "Vice President of East Coast Television and Microwave Oven Programming," and often in the earlier seasons he toggles schizophrenically between responsibilities managing a sketch comedy series and overseeing microwave product design.

financial and operating controls over its production departments; on the other hand, the process of diversification led Du Pont from thinking of itself largely as a producer of chemicals and synthetic fibers to considering itself a leading producer in such disparate fields as photographic film and pharmaceuticals (Didrichsen 41-42). It retains the centralized accumulation of power that so threatened Josephson and Berle and Means, but it also shows signs of the networked corporation that would define corporate organization toward the close of the century.

These cursory treatments of Bourne, Frank, and the corporation are but a small sampling of the emergence of networked models during the modern period. As markers of intellectual history, they gesture toward the myriad responses to the technological, social, and economic developments that were demanded of the moderns, and, equally importantly, they mediate the dialectical tension of centralization and dispersal that is the cultural logic of modernism. These emergent networked figurations—limited as they are in their capacities as essay, cultural criticism, and business organization—are complemented in another form of modernist intellectual history, narrative, that will be the subject of this project.

Networks In Modernism

In addition to the emergence of networked dynamics in the work of public intellectuals like Bourne, culture critics like Frank, and leaders of the corporate world, modernist aesthetics provided another field for experimentation with networked models in the intellectual history of the modern period, and indeed mark another sphere of engagement with the cultural logic of modernism. We can locate the moderns' increasing deployment of networked configuration in a variety of the period's trademark experiments in the arts, such as collage in the visual arts and montage in film, and

especially in the narrative experiments that I will focus on in the following chapters. Like the intellectual projects discussed above, American modernists were responding to dramatic changes in the developments in various fields of technology, the national and global economies, epistemology, and communities both metropolitan and peripheral—changes that often led them to rethink the nature of their art and its relation to life in the U.S. and abroad. It comes as no surprise, then, that American modernists, whether committed to popular modernisms or avant-garde experimental modernism, would find the network a helpful figure in articulating their complex milieu, and in negotiating the dialectic of centralization and dispersal.

Before beginning to address the networked figuration of modernist narrative, I think it would be helpful to contextualize it amid other networked experiments in modernist aesthetics that were in deep conversation with modernist writers, as chapters on Jean Toomer's *Cane* (1923) and John Dos Passos's *U.S.A.* trilogy (1930-36) will demonstrate. Collage, for example, is an umbrella term for several techniques—*papier collé*, *assemblage*, *decoupage*, photomontage, montage, and so on—that share a common aesthetic of dismemberment, simultaneity, and integration, and in the process challenge traditional assumptions about surface and, as Marjorie Perloff writes, “the representability of the sign” (10). The technique was pioneered with Pablo Picasso's *Still Life with Chair Caning* and Georges Braque's *Fruit Dish*—both debuted in 1912, though art historians, to say nothing of the dispute between the artists themselves, disagree about whose piece came first—and remained a staple of global modernisms. But collage nonetheless acquired a distinctly American character because of its association with commodification, which in turn evokes the modern American milieu.

Such works rely on a spatialized semiotics, creating conspicuous lacunae between some images and striking juxtapositions between others to foster proliferating relationships of incongruities across the field of vision. Often collage is discussed as operating on a simple, static logic of juxtaposition, when instead a work of collage creates myriad links of meaning on a more fully integrated model. Jean-Jacques Thomas relates this to a hermeneutic of networks, writing that collage subverts “the graphic accumulation with cutups which, at the formal level, signal the importance of the deconcatenation of the verbal chain. Nevertheless, what is implied, beyond this empirical observation, is the establishment of new networks of significance” (80). In other words, the creation of meaning takes place in the interstices of different images and materials, and this representational strategy can be read as an inherently networked formulation: the viewer must assemble the disparate images into some kind of a whole by imagining the relational lines of connection and disconnection that make the piece a unified organism.

Whereas collage operates spatially to produce gaps and juxtapositions that are interconnected through the relational lines of the network, montage functions on a similar scheme involving both spatial and temporal breaks and linkages that the viewer assembles into an integrated, if not altogether coherent, unit. Montage is, of course, a formal relative of collage, and like collage it is an umbrella term that groups together a set of techniques in film—sequential revolutions, overlays, split images, mirrored images, and so on—that deconstruct narrative linearity and challenge even the possibility of Realist representation. Montage was pioneered by Russian filmmakers such as Sergei Eisenstein and Dziga Vertov throughout the 1920s, and David Kadlec

argues that it is an intrinsically Russian form, writing that “the defining characteristics of Soviet film, such as the makeup and pace of their montage sequences, were determined by material circumstances, including an acute shortage of film stock during the transitional post-Revolutionary years” (303-04). But of course montage quickly became a staple technique of popular and experimental film, albeit in varying degrees of intensity.⁵ Like collage, montage is often described in terms of juxtaposition, wherein the production of meaning takes place in the collision of conflicting images. But again I think this reading of the form oversimplifies the form’s insistence on an integrated whole, privileging local disjunctures over the constellar assembly of the entire piece. Walter Benjamin underscores montage’s totalizing impulse in *The Arcades Project* (1982), itself an exercise in what he describes as “literary montage,” in writing that the technique asks the viewer to “assemble large-scale constructions out of the smallest and most precisely cut components. Indeed, to discover in the analysis of the small individual moment the crystal of the total event” (461). The dialectical nature of the process Benjamin describes is best understood as a networked strategy of representation and interpretation: artist and viewer alike construct a web of meanings from the host of interconnecting lines that link the disparate images and sounds into a convergent whole.

The common project of collage and montage lies in a dual emphasis on formal fragmentation and totalization—a project that is a defining feature across high modernist aesthetics, and that reflects the cultural logic of the modern period. This dualism is also one of the constitutive elements of modern American narrative. The fragment has long

⁵ Kadlec observes that some Hollywood filmmakers derisively referred to Eisenstein’s films as using “choppy cutting” because of the speed of his cuts (325 n. 20).

been recognized as a standard trope of modernist fiction and verse, and totalization has been established as an equally central element in modernist literature. These competing impulses—to represent a society breaking into pieces under the pressures of rapid social changes, and simultaneously to find a semblance of unity to guard against outright societal entropy—coincide in the form, as well as the content, of major works of high modernism. As I have indicated in the brief discussions of collage and montage, and as I will demonstrate further in the following chapters on modern American narratives, I believe this dichotomy in modernist narrative can be helpfully articulated through the figure of the network, which mediates the polarities of totality and fragment and draws them into a constellar system—just as the network mediates the dialectical tension of homogeneity and dispersal for modern intellectuals like Bourne. Simply put, the dialectical entanglement of fragmentation and totalization is predicated on the constellar model of the network, openly accommodating dispersal and the nodal configuration of fragments while still insisting on a whole that takes the form of a network.

For American modernists to insist on such a totalizing form does not suggest nostalgia for a mythic wholeness of the bygone past, some desperate longing for the simpler times of knowable communities. Instead, American modernists used network figuration to rethink the very meaning of wholeness and to generate new models for grappling with the changing dynamics of the national space. Not only did these writers use this conceptual tool to rethink the boundaries of representation as part of the modernist rejection of Realist conventions, but they also discovered their usefulness in rethinking the milieu of the modern period. Like Bourne and Frank, American

modernists found in networked models opportunities to articulate major societal changes and to expand the conventions of representation corresponding to the changing American landscape. The ideational model of networks, to gesture toward the case studies that occupy my chapters, could prove handy in rethinking the changing configurations of race in America, in reimagining the interrelated nature of the class system, in redrawing the contours of history and historical study, and in re-envisioning the core dynamics of democracy—issues that demanded reconsideration in light of the raft of transformations the modern period underwent.

For one example of this dialectical movement of fragment and totality in the formal composition of modernist narratives, we might consider the short-story cycle. The typical conventions of this genre involve a set of stories being linked—by plot, character, setting, thematic patterns, relation to a commonly experienced event, and so on—so tightly that the composite rendering of the individual texts deepens the component parts and the whole text alike. The proliferation of the short-story cycle during modernism signals its stature as one of the period's trademark innovations: Willa Cather's *The Troll Garden* (1905), Gertrude Stein's *Three Lives* (1909), Henry James's *The Finer Grain* (1910), Edith Wharton's *Tales of Men and Ghosts* (1910), Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919), Waldo Frank's *City Block* (1922), Ernest Hemingway's *In Our Time* (1925), Thornton Wilder's *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* (1927), John Steinbeck's *Tortilla Flat* (1935), Zora Neale Hurston's *Mules and Men* (1935), Richard Wright's *Uncle Tom's Children* (1938), and Faulkner's *The Unvanquished* (1938)—to give but a survey of the many texts scholars point to when establishing the short-story cycle's emergence in American modernism.

At first glance, these works may appear to be volumes or portfolios of the writer's "greatest hits," given that they collect disparate short fiction and in some cases poems, as well. It is myopic, however, to read them as fragmentary assortments of texts because they always carry some sort of totalizing impulse that demands readers to draw connective lines between the diverse texts. In such cases, the author's avoidance of titles suggesting assortment or merely replicating the title of a shorter work provides an early cue that the work aspires to some totalizing integration of the fragmented texts. Ultimately, short-story cycles act as systems of independent, self-contained pieces organized into a unifying whole—an aesthetic system that today we would articulate in the vocabulary of networks. As networks spanning their constitutive texts, these short-story cycles worked in a variety of ways to rethink national space. Texts like Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* or Steinbeck's *Tortilla Flat* operate on an axis of place that bridges center and periphery to create connective lines that readers could replicate in other contexts. In other cases, texts such as Wilder's *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* articulate modernist problems of temporality with networks that link together generations of development into a coherent system. In other words, by bridging chasms of time and place with multidimensional linking mechanisms, the short-story cycle negotiates the modernist cultural logic of centralization and dispersal, navigating this dialectical tension with the mediating system of the network.

Some close reading of the scholarship on this genre demonstrates the degree to which these texts—and equally significantly, the scholarly discourse about them—draw upon networked dynamics. Though the form was well-established across some 30 years of narrative production, the taxonomic term "short-story cycle" would have been

unfamiliar to modern writers and critics, since it was not even the subject of a book-length work until 1971 with the publication of Forrest Ingram's *Representative Short Story Cycles of the Twentieth Century*. The scholarship that followed served to establish the short-story cycle's generic parameters with significant use of networked formulations.

Ingram, for example, describes the genre as "a set of stories linked to each other in such a way as to maintain a balance between the individuality of each of the stories and the necessities of the large unit" (15). Susan Garland Mann writes that in the genre "the stories are both self-sufficient and interrelated. On the other hand, the stories work independently of one another: the reader is capable of understanding each of them without going beyond the limits of the individual story. On the other hand, however, the stories work together, creating something that could not be achieved in a single story" (15). Maggie Dunn and Ann Morris argue that the short-story cycle's independently complete and autonomous texts "are interrelated in a coherent whole according to one or more organizing principles" and describe the text's organization as "a tissue of fine connectives" (2, 13). In these cases, the scholarly formulation for the genre takes the shape of a network: autonomous stories acting as nodes comprising the network—the "coherent whole," as Dunn and Morris put it—that holds the text together as a constellar body. That the scholarship on this genre arrives during the late twentieth-century fixation on network figuration should come as no surprise: as Ingram, Mann, and Dunn and Morris were studying the conventions of the short-story cycle, the increasing attention to the ideational modeling and metaphorical significance of networks likely influenced their demarcations of the genre's conventions.

By and large, however, scholarship on the short-story cycle falls short of historicizing the genre's prominence in American modernism. Mann, for example, finds a correspondence between the rise of the short-story cycle and the profusion of avant-garde "little magazines" like *The Dial* and *The Masses* that, along with major-market publications such as *The Saturday Evening Post*, made the short story a bankable project for many modernist writers (8). But there is still room to read more complexity in the relationship between this emergent genre and the milieu from which it arose. For the short-story cycle is not merely the byproduct of trends in magazine publication, but a mode of formal experimentation that modernists could use to think the ruptures and ligatures that were changing the features and meaning of American culture. In *Winesburg, Ohio*, for example, Anderson explores the stories of several different figures connected by setting, by their relation to the Bildungsroman character George Willard, and by thematic likenesses such as loneliness, restlessness and grotesqueness. Anderson's perspectivist rendering of a rural Victorian-era town deconstructs the "unity" etymology of "community," rendering Winesburg not a monolithically unified social formation, but a network of its constituents. Hemingway's *In Our Time*, by contrast, offers no unity of plot, setting, or character: with some of its stories featuring the maturation of Nick Adams and others having nothing whatsoever to do with Hemingway's protagonist, and with inter-chapters that are still further removed from Nick's development—in effect a much more disparate set of texts than those centrally oriented around the township of Winesburg. But scholars such as Debra Modellmog have argued that *In Our Time* should be understood as a loosely coordinated narrative by looking at the similarities of plots throughout the stories, finding one in which we

know Nick to be involved, and deducing that the others have been written by Nick under the mask of an alter ego through a sort of meta-authorship.⁶ The result is that *In Our Time* poses a networked self that is assembled across several disparate texts—not a static, monolithic identity, but a subjectivity built upon a constellar model. In both cases, at the risk of belaboring the issue, Anderson and Hemingway rely on networked figuration to represent community and subject, putting their formal experimentation in dialogue with the same conditions that led Bourne, Frank, and other intellectuals to use networked models to rethink American culture of the modern period.

The prevalence of major-market magazines in the construction of the modernist short-story cycle prompts us to consider popular modernisms as well as the formal experimentation of more avant-garde works. Indeed, both popular and avant-garde writers published in magazines like *The Saturday Evening Post* and *Harper's Bazar*, challenging the traditional dichotomy of high and popular modernisms.⁷ In the popular works of the period, the use of networks shifts from form to content—often to representation of the public culture that thrived during the modern period, and that was itself constitutive of popular modernisms. Hegeman has argued that the modern period was characterized by “a different arrangement of social space than the one we now experience”—one that put a much higher value on spaces of public gathering (“Haunted” 300). This public culture, as David Nasaw points out, was facilitated by the shortened workday’s creation of leisure time, the electrification projects that turned cities into playgrounds of nightlife entertainments, and the expansion of public transit—all of

⁶ See Debra Modellmog’s “The Unifying Consciousness of a Divided Conscience: Nick Adams as Author of *In Our Time*.” *American Literature* 60.4 (Dec. 1988): 591-610.

⁷ See Karen Leick’s “Popular Modernism: Little Magazines and the American Daily Press.” *PMLA* 123.1 (January 2008): 125-39.

which resulted from the sheer human density created by urbanization (3-9). The result of these developments was a spirit of public exchange, as people mixed with unprecedented disregard for traditional social barriers like ethnicity, religious affiliation, or occupation; only persons of color remained excluded from sites of public culture. This “different arrangement of social space,” whose rise and fall generally correspond to the bookends of the modern period, prompted moderns to rethink social formations, often with use of networked figuration.

This public culture manifests itself in the content of modernist narrative in two ways that draw heavily on networked figuration: representation of public spaces and crowds. The heterogeneity that typifies the space of such public exchanges made for a popular choice of setting in many works. Raucous movie theaters of the nickelodeon era, cavernous movie palaces, the curious sociological site of dance halls, amusement parks attracting people from all walks of life, and city streets themselves—these all provided settings in which strangers mixed freely, defying many of the quarantining norms of class and ethnicity. Writing of 1930s Hollywood film, Rem Koolhaas argues that the hotel, another of these public spaces,

relieves the scriptwriter of the obligation of inventing a plot. A Hotel *is* a plot—a cybernetic universe with its own laws generating random but fortuitous collisions between human beings who would never have met elsewhere. It offers a fertile cross section through the population, a richly textured interface between social castes, a field for the comedy of clashing manners and a neutral background of routine operations to give every incident dramatic relief. (149-50)

Koolhaas is thinking of films like Edmund Goulding’s *Grand Hotel* (1932), but the same could be said of several other modernist works. For example, Horace McCoy’s *They Shoot Horses, Don’t They?* (1935) takes place at a dance marathon, the entertainment fad of the Depression era. Here, the public space of the dance floor facilitates a mix of

aspiring stars looking for their big break, the down-and-out looking for a reliable source of meals, and criminals on the run looking for a place to blend into the crowd. The dance marathon's system of interchangeable partners constantly invents new links between the dancers, and the patronage of dedicated fans forges links between dancers and their audience, together building an interpersonal network out of the public spaces of the dance marathon. That the public space itself could function as the plot in such narratives demonstrates the moderns' curiosity with its influence over social organization. For the public space is not merely an inert setting, but an agential force of networking: it forces disparate individuals into contact, and while that contact often falls short of intimate and lifelong ties, it fosters myriad transitory links connecting each individual to the others through innumerable other mediating links—in effect using space itself to create a social network in defiance of stratifying social systems of class, gender, ethnicity, and so on.

In a related fashion, another manifestation of public culture in modernist narrative, the representation of crowds, focuses not on the spatial organization involved in public culture, but on the very specific social formation it produced. The modern period was, as Gustav Le Bon famously proclaimed in *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind* (1895), “the era of crowds.” While the figure of the crowd was often used to malign the lower orders of the class system as hive-mindedly destructive, it also provided a handy conceptual tool to think the new experience of urbanization. For example, in King Vidor's film *The Crowd* (1928), the crowd acts as a generic antithesis to the domestic sphere. In an early title card, protagonist Johnny Sims is advised, “You've got to be good in that town if you're going to get ahead of the crowd.” This crowd-as-competition

motif is reinforced in a sequence of shots featuring the city's human density that scale bigger and bigger to the city's imposing skyscrapers, one of which gives way to an interior view of a massive Taylorized workplace where Johnny's desk is but a speck in the crowded room.⁸ For Vidor, the crowd is an abstraction of the urban experience that only exists as an implicit counterpoint to the domestic sphere.

And at a further allegorical remove, the crowd provided writers a figure by which to imagine possibilities for flattened, truly democratic social bodies. When the child David Schearl is electrocuted by the third rail in the climax of Henry Roth's *Call It Sleep* (1934), it is a crowd of onlookers that comes to the rescue. Roth presents a cacophony of disembodied voices representing the many dialects of New York's Lower East Side: "W'at?" "W'ut?" "Va-at?" "Gaw blimey!" "W'atsa da ma'?", they cry out as they discover David's body on the rails (419). This synecdochal rendering of the city's ethnic diversity acts together, collectively finding a broom and arranging David's rescue from the tracks. The effect is twofold: Roth's crowd rejects the stereotypically destructive behavior of so-called "crowd mentality," and their coordinated efforts gesture toward a bridging of ethnic dispersal that might only be performed in the networked environment of the crowd. The integrated heterogeneity of the crowd marks it as a social formation that renders each individual on a leveled plane, relating to one another by interpersonal mediating links, instead of defining relationships according to social institutions like, in the case of *Call It Sleep*, ethnicity. So while representations of the crowd often connoted the vacuity and viciousness of mythic "crowd mentality," they also carried a

⁸ For a lucid periodizing study of the spatial theory of the office throughout the twentieth century, see Jeremy Myerson's "Power of the Network: Transitions in Working Life from Taylorist Time and Motion to Networked Space" in *Networks of Design*. Ed. Jonathan Glynn, Fiona Hackney, and Viv Minton. Boca Raton, FL: Universal, 2009. 11-17. Electronic book.

utopian charge, positing a field in which individuals are freed from institutional social barriers to create links of their own design.

Characterological networks, the narrative analogue of what today we refer to as the six-degrees-of-separation theorem, provided modernists with another way of articulating the period's social changes in content. This now-familiar strategy enlists a large cast of characters, whose lives become entangled as they appear, disappear, and reappear in varying levels of intimacy with each other. Often the ligatures between characters are fleeting and cursory, or characters are only related through a string of mediating links, or characters themselves are unaware of their own connections to each other created by chance crossings. The contingent nature of many of these interconnections assigns the reader the responsibility of drawing the constellar lines between characters to articulate the network that they do not have the perspective to recognize. This is the organizational principle in, for example, Dos Passos's *Manhattan Transfer* (1925), wherein the operant "transfer" is not a rail station but the myriad exchanges that take place between the novel's dozens of characters as their lives intersect, entangle, and diverge—a strategy Dos Passos also deployed throughout the fictional narratives of his *U.S.A.* trilogy. Characterological networks offered modernist writers a means of rethinking the physical boundaries of a knowable community, as well as the degrees of intimacy needed to maintain it—a vital response to the rapidly urbanizing, globalizing world.

From collage in the visual arts to characterological networks in modernist fiction, the use of network figuration is implicit. The artists themselves do not articulate these representative strategies in a vocabulary that today we would associate with the

discourses of networks that have attended the digital revolution and the most recent phases of globalization. But these later discourses illuminate the modernist projects that anticipate the networked patterns and principles that would rise to prominence in the theory and representation of the late twentieth century. What I am suggesting, then, is not an anachronistic application of contemporary paradigms backward onto texts that have little use for them, but a study of how these modernist texts prefigure much of today's network discourse—often fumbling in the dark to arrive at the right articulation—and even provide us an archaeology of possibilities for networked thought by reminding us of theoretical and representational models that have fallen by the wayside somewhere in the passage of the twentieth century. Reading networks in modernist narrative is informative of the intellectual history of networked discourses, and will illuminate the distinct ways in which moderns used such figurations to deal with their changing milieu.

“The Modern American Network Narrative”

The use of characterological networks in modernist fiction like *Manhattan Transfer* leads us to return to the case of ABC's failed series *6°*, and to discuss the stakes of “The Modern American Network Narrative.” Prompted by the profusion of this brand of networked representation through the 1990s and 2000s, and by the emergence of hypertextual fiction, scholars have begun to codify the conventions of a supposedly new genre—the network narrative—according to a narrow slice of networking devices in a narrow period of textual production. The first objective of my dissertation, then, is to correct this oversimplification of the genre by looking at its diversity of conventions and by broadening its period through the study of modernist texts that operate on networked organization or otherwise represent social networks.

Film critic David Bordwell's discussion of the network narrative in *Poetics of Cinema* (2008) is symptomatic of this uninformed confinement of the genre. Drawing on prior studies of "thread structure" and his own exploratory work on the genre, Bordwell tries to position the genre as solely an outcropping of the six-degrees theorem.⁹ Referencing films such as Robert Altman's *Short Cuts*, Wong Kar-wai's *Chungking Express* (1994), Quentin Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction* (1994), and Paul Thomas Anderson's *Magnolia*, Bordwell posits narratological claims that chance is the motivator of these texts' social networks, that the traffic accident is the genre's standard figuration of convergence, and that their fundamental tensions are between realism and contrivance, accident and destiny. Bordwell allots the bulk of his study to talking about the extent to which characters are "goal driven," or observing how the action of these texts takes place in a common time scheme, or describing how many networks are related by an "event frame," or demonstrating how the "suppressive The notable thing about Bordwell's treatment of the network narrative in *Poetics of Cinema* is that while he makes perfunctory nods to predecessor texts like *Manhattan Transfer*, *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, Vicki Baum's *Shanghai '37* (1939) and others, his impulse is to locate the network narrative in the 1990s and 2000s. And it is easy enough for Bordwell to perform this historical truncation, because the criteria by which he judges the genre consist only of characterological schemes for constructing representational networks.

⁹ See Evan Smith's "Thread Structure: Rewriting the Hollywood Formula." *Journal of Film and Video* 51.3-4 (Fall-Winter 1999): 88-96. See also David Bordwell's "Subjective Stories and Network Narratives." *The Way Hollywood Tells It*. Berkeley: U California P, 2006. 72-103. Both of these texts are rigorously anti-theoretical and anti-historicist in their treatment of the genre, preferring a narratological approach to generic conventions. They are useful markers, however, of nascent attempts to codify the generic boundaries of period and convention

David Ciccoricco's *Reading Network Fiction* (2007) stages a similar truncation of the genre, locating it in the narrative production of digital environments. "Network fiction," he writes, "makes use of hypertext technology in order to create emergent and recombinatory narratives" (Ciccoricco 4). Because of their non-linear organization, such stories demand that readers combine and recombine the different nodal units of the text to produce a more coherent, amalgamated narrative. It is a formulation that might seem well suited to the modernist aesthetics of networks that we discussed above, except that for Ciccoricco they can only take place in electronic media: "Writers of network fictions are less concerned with confronting the reader with mutually exclusive outcomes and more concerned with the way narratives emerge in digital environments" (6). This is a helpful premise for approaching his objects of study—works from the Storyspace school, so named because they were written in the Storyspace hypertext authoring software, such as Michael Joyce's *afternoon* (1990), or Judd Morrissey's *The Jew's Daughter* (2000). Like Bordwell, he places severe strictures on the formal and historical spectrum of the network narrative genre.

The point of generic classification is, of course, to limit the field to a set of patterns that texts have in common. In this respect Bordwell and Ciccoricco—and the other scholars of whom I take them as representative examples—succeed in delineating a very clearly demarcated set of conventions by which to group texts. To define a genre is a terribly messy business that almost always entails amendment and revision, so I certainly empathize with Bordwell and Ciccoricco when I advance a more inclusive formulation for the network narrative: simply that it mediates the dialectic of totalization and fragmentation with linking mechanisms that draw atomized nodal formations into a

constellar system. Precisely what kind of networks such a narrative might use as a narrational model is variable—networks of people, material or technological networks, and perhaps most relevant to the American modernists, networks of form itself, to name but a few possibilities to supplement Bordwell’s and Ciccoricco’s contributions. Of course this flexibility is at once the strength and the weakness of such a loose definition, and for my purposes it allows us to read the networked dynamics of modernist texts such that we can expand the generic conventions of the network narrative.

The texts that I have selected for this project follow that generic dictate in ways that are often radically different from the kinds of texts typically grouped together as network narratives in contemporary scholarship. They rely on formal devices of fragmentation and reintegration to stage different allegories for national space as a negotiation of unity and dispersal. Or they use particular spaces and group formations, such as the hotel and the crowd, to theorize social configurations that reassemble modernism’s diverging emphases on totality and the fragment. In expanding the generic conventions of the network narrative outlined by Bordwell and Ciccoricco, these readings not only locate the network as an important dynamic of modernist aesthetics, but also explore some of the techniques of networked figuration that are largely absent in today’s manifestations of the genre and its scholarship. The public spaces of the hotel and the crowd’s figuration of public culture, for example, provide us with an archaeology of forgotten or abandoned methods of narrating the dialectic of totality and the fragment. The study of these lost domains of the network narrative genre is instructive of the genre’s limitations today, but also the limitations of contemporary network thinking.

But even while “The Modern American Network Narrative” stakes out the discontinuities of the genre over the last century, there are some continuities worth observing in relation to the conditions of network thinking. From my claim that the network narrative genre’s primary function is to negotiate the dialectic of totality and fragment, unity and dispersal, it might follow that the genre is wholly confined to the modern period, which at the outset I characterized as having a cultural logic of that very dialectical tension. While this dialectic is the dominant tension of the modern period—in the work of intellectuals like Bourne and Frank, in the organization of corporations and the Fordist workplace, in modernist aesthetics, and so on—it also persists into postmodernism. One of the traditional assumptions about postmodernism is that the ascendancy of the fragment is one of its central elements. But postmodernism is also typified by totalizing gestures, as demonstrated by Frederic Jameson’s investment in the project of cognitive mapping¹⁰ or in the more recent turn to the study of globalization. The presence of this dialectical tension in both modernism and postmodernism indicates that the networked representation identified by Bordwell and Ciccaricco and the networked discourses dominating the work of Castells, Hardt and Negri, Latour, and others signal a residual trace of modernism—a trace inflected to account for the digital revolution and transformations in globalization, but a trace that nonetheless draws connective lines between the two periods of intellectual history. In one sense, we might be able to understand narratives like *6°*, *Crash*, *Syriana*, and *Babel* as demonstrating a nostalgia for the public culture that was a key element of American

¹⁰ For example, in *Postmodernism* Jameson writes that the function of cognitive mapping is “to enable a situational representation of the part of the individual subject to that vaster and properly unrepresentable totality which is the ensemble of society’s structures as a whole” (51). The process of cognitive mapping, whether in criticism, theory, or representation, is the very practice of totalization.

modernism, as I will demonstrate in the coda of the project. In other words, the persistence of the cultural logic of modernism—the dialectical movement of totality and the fragment mediated by the figure of the network—is what makes networked discourses of the postmodern period articulable.

Beyond restoring to the network narrative the generic breadth that it is routinely denied in recent scholarship, “The Modern American Network Narrative” takes up a second objective of considering what modernist experiments in networked figuration signal about American culture of the modern period, and how modernist writers tried to sort out their complicated milieu. This involves, in part, taking narrative production as a marker of intellectual history so that we can explore how American moderns’ use of the network as a conceptual tool broadens our understanding of network discourses. Moreover, it provides us with a new way to engage the important work of the American modernists. To accept the uninformed position that network narratives are a product of the late twentieth century amounts to consenting to the foreclosure of a major element of modernist intellectual production. For if networks are the sole domain of the waning decades of the twentieth century, we lose out on a rich dynamic that informed much of the intellectual and aesthetic production of the modern period. In situating networks as a central dynamic of modernist production, I aim to provide a new lens for scholarly inquiries of modernist narrative, and to align the way that we think about the moderns more closely with the way that they were beginning to think about their own world.

The following chapters sketch out a reassessment of the network narrative genre and consider the moderns’ nascent explorations of networked conceptual models through readings of modernist narratives both canonical and non-canonical, avant-

garde and popular. These chapters do not share any steady development of the network narrative genre, nor do they have in common any obvious links of influence, apart from their shared milieu. In fact, it would be fair to wager that these writers would have found each other's politics and aesthetics detestable. Jean Toomer famously spurned any form of artistic affiliation, even rejecting association with the Harlem Renaissance before giving up on the project of creative writing altogether. Herself a staple in the celebrity press, Anita Loos traveled mostly in Hollywood circles, and her few sustained ties to the literati involved H.L. Mencken and F. Scott Fitzgerald. Dos Passos's political enthusiasm during the 1920s and 30s would have made for tension alongside the ambivalence of Toomer or Nathanael West, to say nothing of the latent conservatism of Loos. West, an enigmatic persona of nearly continuous self-fashioning, had several ties to fellow moderns through co-editing the little magazine *Contact* and through his visits to the Greenwich Village bohemians, but out of a mix of shyness and contrarianism he kept mostly to himself. Indeed, a cocktail party putting these writers into close contact would not be a pleasant affair. In the absence of an identifiable movement to group these writers together, or any aesthetic or political commitments shared by their texts, the logic of chapter selection in "The Modern American Network Narrative" may seem oddly disparate. But the very dispersal of these texts is instructive, as it reflects the wide range of texts that rely on networked models across the field of modernist narrative production. In other words, these chapters map out the constellar quality of networked representation in American modernism, and the juxtapositions and lacunae created by the incongruities of the

chapter's objects give this project a quality similar to one of modernism's aesthetic hallmarks, collage.

Chapter 2 studies the formal architecture of Jean Toomer's *Cane* (1923) as an experiment in networked organization that presents an allegorical rendering of race in America. Comprised of some thirteen short stories, fifteen poems, and a longer segment verging on drama, *Cane* presents readers with serious interpretative dilemmas—not the least of which is taxonomy. It is clearly not a novel in any conventional sense, and the formal diversity of its texts excludes it from being called a short-story cycle. Yet its title suggests something more coherent than a mere collection of assorted works, and Toomer expressed reluctance to let the pieces stand alone, writing of anthologies like *The New Negro* (1925), “I did not want *Cane*, which is an organism, dismembered, torn to bits and scattered about in the pages of anthologies” (102). Critics have often discussed *Cane*'s textual unity in terms of hybridity, but the stubborn independence of Toomer's stories and poems defy any attempt to think of *Cane* as a sort of textual fusion. Instead, I propose a reading of *Cane* that allows the autonomy of these texts and their interdependence—a network narrative made up of the linking repetition of phrases and figures that bridge *Cane*'s lacunae and transform the text into an “organism,” to use Toomer's descriptor. In substituting the network for hybridity, I also propose a new reading of Toomer's social poetics that mobilizes the networked form of *Cane* as an allegory for the networked situation of race relations in the United States that stands in stark contrast with visions of race corresponding to the fused unit of the melting pot.

Turning from the avant-garde to the popular, Chapter 3 focuses on Anita Loos's *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (1925) to consider how it stages public spaces as sites of radical heterogeneity. Loos's novella was the second-best selling novel of the following year, and it created a franchising juggernaut that banked on its success. *Blondes* rode to success mostly on the back of protagonist Lorelei Lee, known for her inadvertent wit, her extravagant flapper lifestyle, and the suggestions of her promiscuity. But my focus here is on Loos's use of the grand hotels that are Lorelei's haunt of choice, and how these settings foster social networks. Despite the fact that their lodging priced out the vast majority of the American public, grand hotels had a reputation as public spaces because their lobbies, bars, parlors, ballrooms, and restaurants were freely accessible to any reasonably dressed white person. For this reason, historian A.K. Sandoval-Strausz frames the hotel as a contact zone: "[H]otels created what might be called a multiplier effect: because people came to the same hotel spaces for many different reasons, there was constant crossing and commingling that exposed people to unexpected individuals and ideas" (261). It is precisely this connective element of the hotel that Lorelei uses to forge links to people from an array of nationalities and class positions. Acting as a dominant anchor of social networks that she creates around her, Lorelei, even the social climber, paradoxically flattens class hierarchy into a constellar organization. Perhaps inadvertently, Loos offers a restructuring of the class system that eschews the atomizing nature of caste in favor of a more entangled, networked vision akin to a cocktail party—another of Lorelei's, and Loos's, favorite spatial-social sites.

Chapter 4 returns to the study of modernist formal experimentation with an analysis of John Dos Passos's *U.S.A.* trilogy (1930-36). Like *Cane*, *U.S.A.* defies

traditional literary taxonomy. The trilogy traces the history of the United States from 1900 up until the late 1920s, displacing linear narration in favor of four separate modes of representation that Dos Passos thought would more accurately communicate the spirit of the times. This narrational architecture, which Dos Passos referred to as a “four-way conveyor system,” is comprised of four completely independent narrative mechanisms: “Newsreels” passages that use newspaper copy, advertisements, and song lyrics to capture the zeitgeist of the period; “Camera Eye” passages that narrate the lived experience of the period through a stream-of-consciousness rendering of Dos Passos’s own life; biographical sketches that outline the period through portraits of leading figures like Woodrow Wilson, Andrew Carnegie, and the Wright Brothers; and fictional narratives that illustrate the period through a matrix of twelve primary characters experiencing different events and developments of the early 1900s. This narrative system caused no shortage of consternation among Dos Passos’s contemporaries, and remains a contentious subject in more recent criticism. I think one way of dealing with Dos Passos’s formal experiment is to read it as drawing constellar links between these autonomous nodes of narration so that they cooperate as a network of narration—much like the networked organization of Fordist production, which perhaps played into Dos Passos’s referring to the trilogy as a “conveyor system.” The implications of my reading of *U.S.A.* are that Dos Passos’s narrative proposes a different way of approaching the study of history—one that prioritizes networked schemas over linear trajectories.

The final chapter examines representations of crowds and the masses in Nathanael West’s *The Day of the Locust* (1939). Noted for its climactic scene of a

frenzied crowd creating a riot, *Locust* is but a part of West's career-long interest in the signification of crowds. But even within *Locust*, West's crowds are more diverse than the apocalyptic gathering of the finale. The rowdiness of these crowds, reflective of the unruly audiences of the nickelodeon era that loom large in the background of this Hollywood novel, overshadows the simple facts of the crowd's configuration. Internally diversified and inclusive, the crowd is designed to assimilate each individual into relations to the others on a networked principle of organization: no one stands about the multiplicity of the group. While crowds were a popular subject for West and others during the modern period because of their association with urbanization and Fascism, I argue that the crowd's networked organization is another part of its appeal to the moderns, as it helped them rethink the workings and figuration of democracy. Moreover, West's interest in crowds is symptomatic of a narrow window of the network narrative genre that focuses on crowd figuration—so confined to the modern period that today we might well consider it lost in terms of the genre's turn toward characterological networks. The relative abandonment of network discourse focusing on the collective nature of the crowd—reflective of what Hegeman refers to as the moderns' "different arrangement of social space"—indicates not only an historical difference in the contemporary network narrative genre of Bordwell's and Ciccaricco's studies, but also a shortcoming in our networked discourses today that seem largely unable to imagine collectivity growing out of connectivity.

CHAPTER 2 JEAN TOOMER'S *CANE*

The journey of Jean Toomer's *Cane* through the twentieth century is by now well known. Published in 1923 after having made the rounds in many of the major "little magazines" of the day, it became a critical success and kindled the creative fires of the Harlem Renaissance, leading to a reprinting in 1927, after which *Cane* would be out of print for some forty years. But while many selections from *Cane* remained easily accessible in anthologies—venues with which Toomer frequently had fraught relationships that I will explore in further detail below—*Cane* itself slipped in profile until Arna Bontemps ushered it back into wide circulation in 1969. Since then, it has reclaimed its canonical position in American literature, and it has been the subject of numerous book-length works of criticism. And the life of the author was as slippery and mercurial as the text's passage through the century, as Toomer's letters have provided a major body of misdirection and misrepresentation bent on autobiographical revision.

But while *Cane*'s publication life is familiar, its precise role in American literary history is still highly contested. Scholarly treatments of *Cane* are about as disparate as the text itself: sometimes focusing on the text's authenticity of voice in representing African-American communities or the South, sometimes addressing its representations of gender, sometimes studying its formal innovation, and sometimes seeking the devices and themes that unify its discrete stories, poems, and prose. I take *Cane* as a marker of the cultural logic of modernism, as its formal organization stakes out the dialectical tensions of homogeneity and dispersal and mediates them with networked figuration.

Like many works of high modernism, *Cane* demonstrates paradoxical impulses in its reliance on formal fragmentation and its insistence on the totalization of its disjointed components. What is distinctive about *Cane*'s particular strategy of fragmentation is its integration of divergent forms—the short story, verse, and prose that verges on drama. These elements are simultaneously autonomous and interdependent, as Toomer links them together into *Cane*'s project of organization and assembly. In linking these texts together into an “organism,” as he called *Cane*, Toomer relies on networked figuration, and in turn uses the network as a conceptual tool to think the meaning of race in the United States.

Because *Cane* is renowned as difficult to read and categorize, part of the work of establishing it as a network narrative will require an examination of the different methods of reading the text—especially through the lens of its generic classification—that have been applied to it over the years. While my reading of *Cane* does not aim to reconcile all of these scholarly approaches into a consistent tradition of literary criticism, it will often locate within these different critical vantage points a latent language of networks—especially in treatments of the text that focus on its elements of collage or try to reconcile its formal diversification—that reflect the text's own nascent experiment in networked aesthetics. Establishing *Cane*'s networked organization—both in the dialectical movement of fragmentation and totalization in its form, and in the circulation of the eponymous commodity cane throughout its content—enables readers to resolve some of the text's taxonomic difficulties. But moreover, reading *Cane* as a network narrative demonstrates the network's centrality to modernist aesthetics, and the

important work it facilitated in the moderns' rethinking of the dramatically changing American landscape.

Genre: Short-Story Cycles And Network Narratives

Since its publication, readers have struggled to come to terms with *Cane's* form and genre. Composed of thirteen short prose pieces, fifteen poems that include sonnets, ballads, and work songs, and a longer piece that nods toward the conventions of drama, *Cane's* very form presents a number of taxonomic challenges. The dominant trends today are to treat it as a volume or as a short-story cycle, but for reasons I will explore below, these formulations are insufficient for the major interventions *Cane* was making. Instead, drawing on its integrated system of fragmentation and totalization, I situate *Cane* as a network narrative.

While it was received positively upon publication, timid explanations of the strange assortment of prose and verse prevailed in the reviews. Robert Littell's review for the *New Republic* chose to treat *Cane's* first two sections as a single unit of prose and verse sketches: "*Cane* is sharply divided into two parts. The first is a series of sketches, almost poetic in form and feeling, revolving around a character which emerges with very different degrees of clarity. The second half is a longish short story, Kabnis, quite distinct from the sketches, and peculiarly interesting" (32). Paul Rosenfeld's profile of Toomer in a 1925 encyclopedia of literary figures describes *Cane* as a "miscellany" (v). And a chorus of reviewers labeled *Cane* a "volume," as does a reviewer for the *Dial*, who characterized it as "a volume of sketches of negro [sic] life in the large cities and in the cotton fields" (92). The difficulty contemporary reviewers met in finding consensus on a method to deal with *Cane's* complex form marks the beginning of a long literary history of dissensus on the text's formal dynamics.

The inability to call upon a readymade taxonomy is but one part of the struggle to identify a genre for *Cane*, and it has proven a messy issue to sort out since the earliest treatments of the text. Early reviewers' penchant for discussing *Cane* as a "volume" had the practical advantage of recognizing the diversity of texts it comprises, but of course had the disadvantage of treating *Cane's* texts as separate, unrelated bodies. The term "short-story cycle," which tends to settle for many scholars today the taxonomic difficulties reviewers had upon *Cane's* publication, was not available for reviewers to draw on, as it was not even the subject of a book-length work until Forrest Ingram's *Representative Short Story Cycles of the Twentieth Century*, published in 1971. Perhaps part of the reason why this label so often sticks to *Cane* is that the short-story cycle was such a familiar staple of modern narrative. As I mentioned in the introduction, many such texts would have prepared readers for the kind of work Toomer is performs in *Cane*, and two of that number—Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919), and Waldo Frank's *City Block* (1922)—were major influences specifically cited by Toomer. Given the profusion of such texts in American modernism, it would be convenient to situate *Cane* as a short-story cycle.

For many readers, *Cane* may be an intuitive fit as a short-story cycle. But even sophisticated formulations of the genre that would suffice for the average short-story cycle have trouble grappling with *Cane's* distinctive qualities. Ingram, for example, defines the short-story cycle as "as a book of short stories so linked to each other by their author that the reader's successive experience on various levels of the pattern of the whole significantly modifies his experience of each of its component parts" (19)—a formulation that James Nagel rightly says relies too heavily on the intentional fallacy.

Nagel, in turn, describes the genre as “the collection of a group of independent stories that contain continuing elements of character, setting, action, imagery, or theme that enrich each other in intertextual context” (15). J. Gerald Kennedy describes the genre as a short-story sequence, choosing “sequence” over “cycle” in order “to emphasize its progressive unfolding and cumulative effects” (vii). Maggie Dunn and Ann Morris label the genre “the composite novel,” which they define as “a literary form that combines the complexities of a miscellany with the integrative qualities of a novel” (1)—a formulation that allows for devices other than the short story. As I argued in the introduction, the short-story cycle is typical of American modernism’s complex navigation of the dialectical movement of fragment and totality, and in fact the mediation of those polarities through the formal composition of the short-story cycle aligns it with the properties of the network narrative genre.

The networked aesthetics of the short-story cycle are reflected in the language of scholarship that delineates its generic parameters. For example, Ingram defines the short-story-cycle genre as “a set of stories linked to each other in such a way as to maintain a balance between the individuality of each of the stories and the necessities of the large unit” (15). Similarly, Susan Garland Mann argues that in the genre, “the stories are both self-sufficient and interrelated. On the one hand, the stories work independently of one another: the reader is capable of understanding each of them without going beyond the limits of the individual story. On the other hand, however, the stories work together, creating something that could not be achieved in a single story” (15). Dunn and Morris describe the text’s organization as “a tissue of fine connectives” (13). In each case, the formulation for the short-story cycle takes the shape of a

network: autonomous stories act as nodes comprising the network that holds the text together as a cooperative unit. In other words, the short-story cycle and the scholarship that defines it are both inscribed with the cultural logic of modernism, navigating the dialectical tension of homogeneity and dispersal. Describing the genre in such a dialectical framework is unsurprising, given the short-story cycle's rise during American modernism, as that very dialectical tension marks the central cultural logic of modernism.

Given the networked properties of the short-story cycle and the networked aesthetics of *Cane*, one might find ease in fitting Toomer's text under the short-story cycle's generic umbrella. Indeed, much of the scholarship on the short-story cycle includes *Cane* as part of the genre. But *Cane* is clearly not a short-story cycle. To call it so is to look for a comfortable taxonomy at the expense of the bulk of the text which, to put it bluntly, does not consist of short stories. Moreover, to follow Kennedy's emphasis on sequencing would be to impose a linearity upon the text that precludes a good deal of its dynamic movement. And while Dunn and Morris's suggestion of the term "composite" certainly creates flexibility in dealing with *Cane*'s formal diversity, their reliance on the term "novel" suggests some formal conventions—a concrete plot, a shared setting, and so on—that *Cane* does not deliver.

What makes *Cane* exceptional, what distinguishes it from the short-story cycle is that it does not offer a unity of setting, nor does it offer a dominant protagonist or even a unity of characters, nor does it offer a unity of form. Instead, *Cane* vacillates between rural Georgia and the urban spheres of Washington, D.C., and Chicago; it spans a set of characters who, with rare exception, do not interface; and it alternates between

poetry, prose, and a drama-like form. At the same time, *Cane* is not a collection, not some portfolio of the artist's greatest hits—which readers understand quickly enough from Toomer's selection of a title that avoids assortment and aspires to some totalizing vision. For these reasons, and because the various guises of the short-story cycle—the short-story sequence and the composite novel included—are insufficient classifications for *Cane*, I propose that we read *Cane* not as a short-story cycle, but as a network narrative, a designation that will help us understand the complex interrelationships of *Cane*'s texts, as well as the sophisticated critique it poses for modern American culture.

Positioning *Cane* as a network narrative that mediates the dialectic of totalization and fragmentation with constellar figuration helps resolve some of the scholarly tensions regarding the text's classification, and helps us better understand the text's system of independent, self-contained pieces that are organized into a unifying whole. To read *Cane* in such terms foregrounds the text's interest not in a narrative of fragmentation and dispersal, but in a narrative of interdependence. That narrative impulse, as I will detail below, is staked in the text's logic of formal interrelationships of its diverse pieces of prose and verse, as well as in the networking that takes place in the circulation of cane itself, and it provides an allegorical foundation for Toomer's thinking of race in the United States. *Cane* is an ideal case study in American modernism's development of network figuration because it relies on its connective tissues to an unparalleled extent, offering no place, no character, no plot, not even a codifiable form, but only a set of linking mechanisms to network the text into a whole.

Networks Of Cane

The vast bulk of work on *Cane* tends to locate two major literary influences on Toomer's writing, and these are worth surveying to begin to read the networked logic

that governs the text. The first is Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio*. It is a commonplace for *Cane* scholarship and Toomer biographers to point to a letter he wrote to Anderson in 1922, when he told the venerable short-story writer, "Winesburg, Ohio and The Triumph of the Egg are elements of my growing. It is hard to think of myself as maturing without them" [non-italicization sic] (18). The influence of Anderson's short-story cycles would be easy to recognize in *Cane*—especially if one were to think of *Cane* itself as a short-story cycle out of reluctance to locate another genre to fit Toomer's text into. And besides the literary exchange between Anderson's short-story cycles and Toomer's *Cane*, the relationship between the two men was the stuff of literary legend. Anderson, famously generous with young writers like Ernest Hemingway and William Faulkner, had, according to Mark Whalan, "offered to write a preface for *Cane* and to help find Toomer a publisher" (6). And perhaps equally famous was the falling-out between the two writers that took place when Toomer began to sense that Anderson was essentializing his African-American voice and representations. Whalan finally characterizes this relationship as a cynical one: "Toomer needed Anderson because he could bolster his career and help justify the tremendous energy he was expending on his literary 'neophytism'" (228)—a statement that may challenge the sincerity of Toomer's oft-quoted genuflection to Anderson.

More recent scholarship has argued for the centrality of Waldo Frank, and particularly his 1922 short-story cycle *City Block*, as an influence on *Cane*. Perhaps because Frank was a lesser-known figure than Anderson during the heyday of *Cane* in the 1970s, his influence on Toomer was harder to recognize, but a simple survey of the volumes of correspondence between the two men illustrates the depths of the

relationship. Charles Scruggs and Lee VanDemarr's *Jean Toomer and the Terrors of American History* explains how Frank, the Pound to Toomer's Eliot, had his fingerprints all over the manuscripts of *Cane*: "Frank selected and critiqued pieces, influenced the ideas and forms for individual stories, suggested at least the theoretical conception for the book's structure, and edited the text line by line" (109). In 1922, the two traveled south to Spartanburg, South Carolina together as they researched their work—Toomer still working on *Cane* and Frank setting the groundwork for what would be published in 1923 under the title *Holiday*. In a move that might later have driven a wedge between them, Frank attempted to pass as black in order to get to the "authentic blackness" he was trying to observe. And it was Frank, not Anderson, who ultimately provided Toomer with contacts in the publishing world, advising Toomer about which "little magazines" to send his poems and short stories to, and setting Toomer up with his own publisher, Boni and Liveright, which published *Cane* in the fall of 1923. Despite all the proclamations of Anderson's role as mentor to Toomer, the stronger influence was likely Frank, who had a much more hands-on relationship to the conceptualization and production of *Cane*.

The contrasts between Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* and Frank's *City Block* are informative of the networked logic of *Cane*. Both are short-story cycles—*Winesburg* a set of twenty-five stories set in a fictionalized rural town in Ohio, and *City Block* a set of fourteen stories of people living in the same block in New York City. In terms of aesthetic form, they might bear equal influence on Toomer's construction of a text that relies on disparate texts that are coordinated in the absence of a unified plot, character, or even setting. The fundamental difference is that *Winesburg* thematically insists on the atomization of its characters, whereas *City Block* suggests a totalizing vision of its

figures. Both works are populated with characters who feel alone and desperately isolated, and convincing readings of *Winesburg* can argue for the interrelationships of Anderson's characters based on their common experiences of existential dilemmas or through the metanarration of George Willard. But it is *City Block* that makes its own case for the interconnection of its characters, starting right away with its epigraphic statement: "The author assures the reader that City Block is a single organism and that its parts should be read in order." [non-italicization sic] (6). From the outset, Frank insists that his stories not be taken as miscellany, but that they be read as part of a system. Frank's system hinges on the order of sequence, but even that sequential form allows for interconnections that reach farther than the gaps between adjacent stories, creating a totalizing network that is superimposed over the base sequence that drives the reader through the text.

The totalizing vision driving *City Block* is wrapped up in Frank's embrace of *unanimité*, a literary and theoretical concept belonging to the French poet, novelist, playwright, and essayist Jules Romains that is central to Toomer's conception of *Cane*. Romains detailed *unanimité*, a neologism drawing on the French *unanime*, which translates as "unanimous," in a 1905 manifesto and again in *La Vie Unanime* (1908), where he framed *unanimité* as the product of exchanges between material technology and the social that result in a system of interconnected parts—effectively a nodal figuration of the network formed by human and technological components. Randolph Bourne, who along with Frank was part of the group loosely referred to as "Young America," wrote about *unanimité* in an unpublished manuscript, "A Sociological Poet," where he described it as "the group-life of the city" and praised it for

its denial of the solipsism and isolation of modern life (Scruggs and VanDeMarr 79). Whalan summarizes *unanimisme* by saying that Romains “saw modern life as an harmonious rhythmic system, in which the bodily rhythms of the population and the rhythms of the mechanized city became synchronized, melding the entire environment into what he called an holistic ‘*unanime*’” (193). This concept transfers quite handily to *City Block*, which culminates in a story about Paolo Benati, a 15-year-old whose psychic visions have made up the preceding stories. His consciousness acts as facilitator of the Block’s *unanimisme*, leading him to recognize the “group-life” of the various individuals living on the Block. Indeed, Scruggs and VanDemarr argue, “Frank saw the whole of his short-story cycle as depicting the invisible unity and spirit of the characters within the city block rather than the isolation and separateness of the characters in *Winesburg*; the development of *City Block* was the revelation of an invisible unity, not the growth of an individual experience like that experienced by Anderson’s George Willard” (117-18). Frank, whom Whalan characterizes as “a good friend of Romains’s,” had an interest in *unanimisme* so widely known that in a January 1924 edition of the little magazine *S4N* that was dedicated to studying Frank, two articles assessed his relationship with the concept (194). And Gorham Munson’s 1923 study of Frank’s works suggested that *City Block* would inaugurate “an American phase of *unanimisme*” (53).

The adoption of *unanimisme* in *Cane* may seem counterintuitive, given that *unanimisme* was so rooted in the urban experience for Romains and that the settings in *Cane* are predominantly rural. Nonetheless, many readers can find the spirit of *unanimisme* guiding Toomer’s work, and many of *Cane*’s first reviewers drew precisely that connection. It was during the summer of 1922 when Toomer read *City Block*, and

the experience radically altered his conception of *Cane*, which up to that point he had been thinking of as a collection of pieces without any integrative force (Scruggs and VanDeMarr 119). Frank's introduction of *unanimesme*, generalized beyond the narrow confines of Romain's theorization, allowed Toomer to link past and present, self and other, urban and rural, white and black into the networks that comprise *Cane*. In other words, *unanimesme* provided the fundamental logic by which Toomer began to see the assorted texts of *Cane* emerging as a network narrative.

But precisely how Toomer draws the *unanimesme*-inspired networks in *Cane* is a messy issue—certainly messier than in *City Block*, where the connective lines run directly through the single, centralizing figure of Paolo Benati. The strategies of *Cane*'s network narration lie in the crossroads of its form and its content, both of which are famously fragmentary. But like many modernist texts, *Cane* tries to have it both ways at the formal level by asserting a host of fragments at the same time that it tries to totalize them into a unified system, mediating the two polarities with a networked figuration. This networked design is clear from Toomer's refusals to allow his pieces to appear as excerpts in anthologies.¹ He allowed his pieces to appear in three anthologies of black

¹ Close attention to Toomer's language in describing his objections to anthologizing excerpts of *Cane* reveals that another factor in those decisions could well have been his longstanding struggles with his own racial identity. In "This May Be Said/The Inside Story," he writes that he happily granted Countee Cullen's request to publish some of his poems, but began to turn against the anthologies when he detected their New Negro agenda: "Soon," he writes, "I began seeing two things I did not like. I did not like the boosting and trumpeting and the over-play and over-valuation of the Negro, of the products of the Negro writers, which were springing up. I refused to have any part in this kind of displaying" (102). And he had serious trepidation about linking his own identity to the agenda of many of the black writers' anthologies: "I began discovering that the anthologies had preceded me. Not my own book *Cane*. No, but few people knew about *Cane*. Some, though, did know of the collections, and they had formed pictures and feelings about me based on their impressions of my work and name appearing in these collections" (103). It is no coincidence that this period, when he was losing his taste for requests to anthologize pieces from *Cane*, also corresponds to the period when Toomer began rejecting racial categorization of himself, refusing racial labels of "white" and "black" and choosing instead to be viewed as part of the "American race."

writers throughout the 1920s, and a few of *Cane*'s pieces circulated in various anthologies from 1927 to 1969 as *Cane* itself was out of print, but he was generally reluctant to allow the pieces to stand alone. In "This May Be Said/The Inside Story," an unpublished essay from around 1932, Toomer accuses Alain Locke of printing the short story "Fern" in the 1925 anthology *The New Negro* without his consent, and wrote of the many requests from anthology editors, "I did not want *Cane*, which is an organism, dismembered, torn to bits and scattered about in the pages of anthologies" (102). The tensions between Toomer and these anthology editors underscores the interdependence he intended to build between the different texts of *Cane*, and that system of formal interdependence, as well as the techniques that constitute it, requires some explication.

One of the primary ways in which Toomer achieves this networked interconnection of texts is what many scholars refer to, drawing upon visual metaphor, as collage. Indeed, collage is one of the dominant terms in *Cane* scholarship, and it is a useful tool in protecting the text from the dismemberment of the "organism"—note the similarity to Frank's epigraph, "The author assures the reader that City Block is a single organism and that its parts should be read in order....."—that so worried Toomer. Collage is, of course, an umbrella term for many techniques—*papier collé*, *assemblage*, *decoupage*, photomontage, montage, and so on—that have in common an aesthetic of fragmentation that creates meanings in the interstices of different images and materials. The result, writes Jean-Jacques Thomas, is "the establishment of new networks of significance" (80).

In relying on the networked logic of collage, *Cane* effectively generates a *unanimisme* of form itself. Like Romain's conception of a streetscape as a unified body comprised of people, the street, shops, cabs, public benches, and so on, Toomer posits a system of literary forms. Not only does it integrate prose pieces, verse, and a quasi-dramatic element into its networked system, but also these forms themselves are often internally unstable. "Beehive," for example, has the surface values of a sonnet—14 lines with a turn registering between the octave and the sestet, where the focus changes from the beehive of urban density to the speaker, a drone longing for freedom—but it rejects any conventional meter or rhyme schemes in favor of free verse: "Wish that I might fly out past the moon / And curl forever in some far-off farmyard flower" (Toomer, *Cane* 50). Some readers might be tempted to view "Beehive" as a localized illustration of the text's overall hybridity, in its harmonious union of a traditional, European form like the sonnet with the more modern, American element of free verse. But instead the poem illustrates the juxtaposition of collage, which rather than hybridity is the fundamental logic of *Cane*. The poem's most productive technique is to juxtapose these two poetic modes—the sonnet and free verse, the traditional and the modern, the European and the American—to establish its network of significance, one that finds its locus of meaning somewhere in-between these traditions.

And "Beehive" is but a localized illustration of the principles of collage that guide the text. The juxtaposition of *Cane*'s various poems and short stories in the first two segments underscores the networking of the text by establishing text-to-text, node-to-node relationships that are the ligatures of the text. In other words, these intertextual relations are the lines by which *Cane* marks its formal networking schemes. Karantha,

the eponymous subject of *Cane*'s first story, is described as being "as innocently lovely as a November cotton flower" by a preacher who catches her at mischief, and the second poem of the text, "November Cotton Flower," develops the flower as figuration of the first segment's schema of autumnal imagery that laments the passing of the rural way of life (Toomer, *Cane* 3, 6). There is no vulgar equation of Karintha to the flower of the poem, but the repetition of the image creates a line of relation between the short story and the poem—a relation that has nothing to do with likeness, so much as it foregrounds the dynamic interplay of texts.

Toomer deploys the same strategy of textual interplay through the figure of the wayward son. "Song of the Son," the fifth poem and eighth overall piece of *Cane*, features a speaker returning to the ancestral land of the South to remember the songs of slaves, lest he forget "What they were, and what they are to me" (14). The narrator of "Fern," the short story separated from "Song of the Son" by the poem "Georgia Dusk," is a similar figure, who observes to himself, "I was from the North and suspected of being prejudiced and stuck-up" (17). And both Ralph Kabnis and Lewis, of the concluding quasi-drama "Kabnis," are perceived as outsiders because they have come to Sempter, Georgia from the North. Again, the repetition of the figure of the wayward son creates lines of connection across *Cane*, not to establish a dominant theme for the text, but simply to underscore the interconnections of its component parts.

The intertextual lines of connection are perhaps most striking in the juxtaposition of "Portrait in Georgia" and "Blood-Burning Moon," the last two pieces of the first part of *Cane*. "Portrait in Georgia" is a free-verse poem that depicts a woman's face in the language of lynching, describing her hair as "coiled like a lyncher's rope" and her body

as “white as the ash / of black flesh after flame” (Toomer, *Cane* 29). This is the first reference to racial violence in *Cane*, and it is immediately followed by a deeper exploration of that theme, as “Blood-Burning Moon” concludes with the grisly lynching of Tom Burwell by a mob of “white men like ants” (Toomer, *Cane* 35). The introduction of the language of lynching, followed by its direct representation, does not pair “Portrait in Georgia” and “Blood-Burning Moon” in some sort of thematic likeness, but again demonstrates the logic of connection between *Cane*’s dynamic texts.

Critics often describe these interstitial, intertextual sites of meaning-production as lacunae—the argument being that there is a purposeful gap in the text, say, between the lynching thematics of “Portrait in Georgia” and “Blood-Burning Moon.” The meanings created in these interstices can of course vary according to the subject and the arrangement of the texts that span the gap. In the case of the pair of lynching pieces, the intervening lacuna could signify something like the unspeakability of the atrocity—a hushed reluctance to narrate the event that later falls over Ralph Kabnis as his cohorts Fred Halsey and Professor Layman discuss local iterations of racial violence in the third section, “Kabnis”. What is equally important to observe about these lacunae, however, is how they shape a spatial organization of *Cane*. By inscribing these open spaces between pieces, Toomer reinforces the spatial figuration of the network in *Cane*’s very form. The space of *Cane*, with its individual pieces connected together, sometimes across wide gaps, is precisely that of the network, which is defined just as much by its nodal interconnections as it is by the vast gaps spanned by the nodes’ relational lines. The spatial nature of *Cane*’s network again raises the similarity to the

visual form of collage, which deploys lacunae in-between juxtaposed images to stretch out the relationships of incongruous images across the field of vision.

While collage defines *Cane*'s formal strategy of networking, there remains a good deal of networking material in the content of Toomer's stories and poems. The first part of *Cane* establishes characterological networks of three figures: King Barlo, Old David Georgia, and an anonymous woman. Barlo appears as a traveling companion of the narrator in "Becky," he is the object of young Esther's desire in "Esther," and he is the subject of one of Tom Burwell's passing remarks in "Blood-Burning Moon." Old David Georgia is named as one of the townspeople who support the exiled woman in "Becky," and he reappears a gossipmonger around the cane processing stoves in "Blood-Burning Moon." Similarly, an unnamed woman is the subject of brief discussion in "Fern" and in "Esther" for having drawn the Madonna on a courthouse wall. In each case, a series of appearances suggests a six-degrees network of the social landscape in part one, which is all we have to establish the connective logic of that section since its setting is not continuous across the various texts. But this mode of network narration cannot hold the entire text of *Cane* together, because there is no overlap of characters between the rural setting of part one and the urban milieu that follows in part two.

The second segment, absent any kind of knowable community in the urban settings of Washington, D.C. and Chicago, focuses more on the material, technological mediations that facilitate social networks. "Her Lips Are Copper Wire," for example, is a free-verse poem depicting a technologically mediated romance wherein the woman on the other end of the phone line is part love interest and part personified mechanization: her body *is* the technology that conveys her voice. While her lips double as the "copper

wire” of the phone line itself, she becomes a cyborg-like figure in the closing lines: “then with your tongue remove the tape / and press your lips to mine / till they are incandescent” (Toomer, *Cane* 57). She must “remove the tape”—presumably electrical tape—that binds her wire-lips in order to embrace the speaker and electrify him, too, with a kiss. Toomer imbues this fundamental human interaction with a quite literal charge of electricity, drawing both the woman and the speaker into an exchange that is simultaneously romantic and technological. The reliance on technological mediations of social networks in the second part of *Cane* should come as no surprise, given that Romain’s theories of *unanimité* were largely focused on the exchanges between people and technologies that he found to be inherent to urban life.

“Kabnis,” the third and final part of *Cane*, argues for an historical mode of networking that links Father John, the deaf-mute whose experience bears witness to the days of slavery, to the young generation of Ralph Kabnis, who himself is deaf to Father John’s testimony. Father John testifies, “O th sin th white folks ‘mitted when they made the Bible lie,” but Kabnis, having already taunted the old man repeatedly, only glares back at him with a look described as “contemptuous” (117). The generational disjuncture is obvious, but what is most noteworthy about this exchange is how Toomer poses a challenge to readers to recognize this trans-generational network where Kabnis fails to see it.

The most crucial element of content networking, however, is cane itself. Cane is not just a mere image that *repeats* in all three parts of the text, as images of dusk and autumn repeat in the first part of the text and underline points of similarity in that segment’s narrative of decline. Instead, it is more productive to think of cane as a

commodity that *circulates* in the text. Charting the flow of a particular commodity is a means of sketching the lines of a network. One might take as an example the flow of wheat in Frank Norris's *Epic of the Wheat*, wherein the transmission of this crop links the struggling farmers of southern California to each other in *The Octopus* (1901), connects the farmers to the Chicagoan stock traders and speculators of *The Pit* (1903), and draws the farmers and speculators into connection with starving wheat consumers of Europe in the planned but unwritten finale to the trilogy, *The Wolf*. Through the circulation of wheat, Norris sketches networked lines of connection between southern California, Chicago, and Europe, demonstrating the interdependence of individual characters who have never met but who share a concrete interest in wheat, which is the material mediation of their network. The connective commodity does not, of course, have to be a crop, but Norris's epic handily demonstrates the principle of this means of narrating the material substance of the network. And in the case of *Cane*, as we will see, the choice of cane as the material agent of interconnection carries heavy symbolic import.

In each of its appearances, cane offers Toomer a slightly different signification, and a study of these uses of cane, though exhaustive and perhaps tedious, will demonstrate how Toomer's use of this commodity charts a networked path across the text. When cataloguing each occurrence of cane in the text, one notices that its uses can be loosely categorized according to the section of the text in which it appears. In other words, each section of the text has a general schema of cane signification that typifies the section. Accordingly the sectional uses of cane draw networks for each

discrete section of the text, and its circulation across all three sections draws a network for the whole of *Cane*.

In the first section, which of all the sections offers the most textual occurrences of cane, the commodity acts as a place-specific image, figuring themes of work and proximate community. Cane first appears in “Becky,” the story of a white woman literally marginalized from town for having and raising two black sons, where cane is one of the offerings brought to Becky by the townspeople who support her in exile. “Old David Georgia, grinding cane and boiling syrup, never went her way without some sugar sap,” the narrator observes (Toomer, *Cane* 8). In its first use, cane acts as a commodity that maintains Becky’s relational lines to her estranged community. In “Carma,” the story of the woman who fakes her suicide in order to deceive her lover, cane is a figure of portent in the story’s epigraphic poem: “Wind is in the cane. Come along. / Cane leaves swaying, rusty with talk, / Scratching choruses above the guinea’s squawk, / Wind is in the cane. Come along” (Toomer, *Cane* 12). In the ballad “Georgia Dusk,” cane figures the synchrony of man and agriculture with images such as the “cane-lipped throng” that inscribe cane onto the very faces of the workers, as well as in the singing of cane that rises above the fields: “Their voices rise . . . the chorus of cane” (Toomer, *Cane* 15). In “Fern” and “Blood-Burning Moon,” the canebrakes offer a place of concealment for sexual rendezvous between the narrator and Fern and between Louisa and Tom Burwell (Toomer, *Cane* 19, 30). In the free-verse poem “Portrait in Georgia,” it is the one image of beauty to counterbalance the atrocious language of lynching used to describe the woman’s appearance: “Breath—the last sweet scent of cane” (Toomer, *Cane* 29). In addition to its place as sexual rendezvous for Louisa and

Tom Burwell, cane has two appearances in “Blood-Burning Moon”: we see it being processed by Old David Georgia in the text’s only scene of cane-related labor, and it is onto this scene that Bob Stone stumbles to learn of Louisa’s indiscretions with Tom (Toomer, *Cane* 31, 34). The metaphors of cane can be manifold, evocative of sweetness, fecundity, sexuality, and even violence. In addition to these, I read cane as a metaphorical device that roots these characters in their rural community, the agricultural labor that sustains it, and the system of labor exploitation evoked by both.

The second section, set in the urban milieus of Washington, D.C. and Chicago deploys cane as a figure of nostalgia for an imagined, idealized community of the South. In “Theater,” Dorris uses the scent of cane to mark herself as “down home” in the hopes of attracting John: “Of old flowers, or of a southern canefield, her perfume” (Toomer, *Cane* 55). In “Calling Jesus,” it is a substance of comfort to the wayward woman of the sketch, who winds up “cradled in dream-fluted cane” (Toomer, *Cane* 58). In “Box Seat,” cane is a marker of class, as down-and-out Dan is quick to note, “I was born in a canefield” (Toomer, *Cane* 59). It appears in the Whitmanian free-verse poem “Harvest Song” where the speaker, a reaper whose repetitious “hunger” marks a desire for the simplicity of an agrarian past, remarks, “It would be good to hear their songs . . . reapers of the sweet-stalk’d / cane, cutters of the corn . . . even though their throats cracked and the strangeness of their voices deafened me” (Toomer, *Cane* 71). Finally, in “Bona and Paul,” cane acts for Paul as an image of an imaginary and idealized Southern community:

Paul follows the sun to a pine-matted hillock in Georgia. He sees the slanting roofs of gray unpainted cabins tinted lavender. A Negress chants a lullaby beneath the mate-eyes of a southern planter. Her breasts are ample for the sucking of a song. She weans it, and sends it, curiously weaving,

among lush melodies of cane and corn. Paul follows the sun into himself and Chicago. (Toomer, *Cane* 73)

In the appearances of cane in the second section, there is a nostalgic look toward the community and ways of living from the rural south that characterize the first part of *Cane*. At the same time, the metaphors of cane in this narrative of nostalgia and collective memory may well distort the very community it looks back to, for the nostalgia for cane in this section relies precisely on *forgetting* its context of oppressive agricultural labor and the violence that accompanied it during slavery and the era of share-cropping. It is only as a sanitized commodity that cane can perform this nostalgic function.

For “Kabnis,” the third section set in the small town of Sempter, Georgia, Toomer attributes to cane a vocal quality. Its vocalization first appears in contrast to Professor Layman: “Layman’s voice is uniformly low and soothing. A canebrake, murmuring the tale to its neighbor-road would be more passionate” (Toomer, *Cane* 92). And shortly thereafter, Toomer reinforces cane’s vocal capacities: “The countryside is ashen, chill. Cabins and roads and canebrakes whisper” (Toomer, *Cane* 93). As Kabnis flees what he presumes to be a lynch mob, cane flanks his path, becoming an image of oppression: “A splotchy figure [Kabnis] drives forward along the cane- and corn-stalk hemmed-in road” (Toomer, *Cane* 93). And in its final appearance, cane is again vocalized, this time in the service of night’s songs: “Night throbs a womb-song to the South. Cane- and cotton-fields, pine forests, cypress swamps, sawmills, and factories are fecund at her touch. Night’s womb-song sets them singing” (Toomer, *Cane* 105). Murmuring, whispering, and singing, cane’s ability to speak deepens the importance of the community dynamics it underscores in the first two sections, because here its

vocalization means that it can bear testimony to the history that it has emerged around it.

That cane helps solidify a narrative for each discrete section of the text demonstrates its networking effect at the sectional level. To read the trajectory of cane across these sections—as a marker of community, as nostalgia for a disappearing community, as vocalization of the history of a community—shows how its circulation throughout the text crafts a narrative for *Cane*. Indeed, the network of cane narrates the decline of one way of life, the rise of another, and the testimony of that passage of history. It is a common enough reading of *Cane* to say that it laments the passing of rural Southern communities and customs, but to demonstrate that narrative being performed in the various appearances of cane demonstrates that the circulation of this commodity, too, undertakes that narrative with a decidedly networked technique.

But even aside from this particular narrative of cane's networks, in the diversity of these examples cane becomes a material networking agent that links the people, places, and practices of the text by its very circulation—much like the circulation of tobacco, for example, offers scholars of transatlanticism an entry-point to mapping the networks of the triangle trade. In fact, Sidney Mintz's *Sweetness and Power* (1986) studies networks of sugar production and consumption in staging his argument that the circulation of sugar is a central development in the history of modernity. In *Cane*, the eponymous commodity circulates in such a way that it draws relational lines between some of the elements of the text that are the hardest for readers to assemble, complementing the text's formal networking scheme with a network that operates at the level of content. Cane crosses boundaries of form, appearing in Toomer's short stories,

verse, and the drama-novella “Kabnis.” It traverses the limits of the urban and the rural, found in rural Georgia, in Washington, D.C., in Chicago, and in the small town of Sempter. It is, in short, the material that is held in common throughout the text, and its very presence sketches networked lines to connect the text’s diasporic forms, characters, and spaces.

Toomer’s circulation of cane is perhaps less sweeping than Mintz’s, which lays cornerstones for capitalism, industry, and consumptive habits, but it marks a materially mediated network nonetheless. And precisely the material nature of this networking strategy demonstrates part of Toomer’s debt to Romain. Romain’s *unanimisme* is a system comprised of exchanges between material technology and human subjects that placed subject and object into a node-network organization. Rosalind Williams describes the fundamental materiality of Romain’s networks:

While the technologies of production are nearly absent from Romain’s work, he is fascinated by the new ways of living and feeling he saw developing along with new systems of communication and transportation. The dominant technological presence in *unanimiste* poetry is the subtle pattern of city vehicles weaving an ever-changing yet predictable network. (179).

Toomer’s networking device is far less new and technological than Romain’s reliance on bridges, trains, automobiles, and barges, but he shares Romain’s focus on a materiality that brings people, commodities, and place into a networked system.

The networks of cane clearly operate in the spirit of “group-life,” as Bourne described Romain’s formulation of *unanimisme*. But cane is, of course, not an arbitrary choice of commodity for Toomer to circulate throughout the text. The symbolic import of cane begins to register already on the title page, in these epigraphic lines of verse: “Oracular. / Redolent of fermenting syrup, / Purple of the dusk, / Deep-rooted

cane” (Toomer, *Cane iii*). A close reading of these lines reveals that cane is not only a material networking device, but also a figuration of tradition—which in turn acts as the ligaments of a network that connects generations. The cane is “oracular” not because it carries any prophetic or predictive qualities, but because it speaks—establishing the trope of vocalizing cane that recurs throughout “Kabnis”—and therefore can bear testimony to the passage of history. That it is “deep-rooted” suggests that cane is not only embedded in the soil, but also in African-American history itself, via the toil of slavery and sharecropping and also in the circulation of a commodity that was vital to the founding of the nation. Cane, then, performs two networking functions: it is the ligament that connects forms, characters, and places in the text, but it also acts as a group-specific networking device that draws relational lines across African-American generations. Thus the “group-life” of Toomer’s *unanimisme* takes a double form in cane, at once inscribing a network of interconnections that constitutes a “group-life” of the text, and at the same time acting as the ligaments of the “group-life” that is group identity. It is with this signification of cane in mind that we can turn to an examination of the politics of *Cane*’s networks of form and content.

Jean Toomer’s Networked America

Toomer’s ambivalence toward the politics of racial identity is well known. Shortly after publishing *Cane*, Toomer rather famously began denying racial identification in terms of black and white and instead took to identifying his race as “American.” This project to generically “Americanize” and strip racial affiliation not only from his identity but also from his works played a large part in the essays and autobiographical writings that followed *Cane*, and for that reason some readings of *Cane* will try to locate that upbraiding of racial politics in the text. But as Scruggs and VanDemarr have shown,

Toomer's post-*Cane* writings mark a shaky historical record that is bent on biographical revision and self-fashioning. This revisionism is particularly evident in the suppression of his leftist leanings in the late 1910s and early 1920s, they argue, and also in the muting of the racial politics he was engaged in as he was writing *Cane*. "Toomer's identity as an African-American writer was perhaps strongest in 1919-22," they write, "judging not only from *Cane* but from his *Call* essays, his association with the Washington, D.C., circle of Alain Locke, his decision to travel to Sparta, Georgia, and his correspondence with both black and white friends" (Scruggs and VanDemarr 83). Given this window of racial identification, it is imperative to read *Cane* as invested in group identity—a project expressed in the "group-life" that is at the heart of *unanimisme*. To read Toomer's investment in group identity alongside *Cane*'s networked form and content is to propose a fundamental reconsideration of the author's race politics and his vision of the nation. Considering *Cane* as a network narrative not only bears out the central role of the figure of the network in American modernism, but it also demonstrates how American moderns relied on the network as a conceptual tool to rethink their changing milieu—and in Toomer's case, the dynamics of race in America.

A great deal of recent scholarship characterizes those conceptions of race as built around hybridity and biracialism. In large part, those readings comport with Toomer's post-*Cane* "American" racial identification, but they also stem from allegorical readings of *Cane*'s form. Taking *Cane* as a fusion of its component texts, such readings project hybridity as the model for Toomer's understanding of the racial dynamics of modern American culture. Joel Peckham, for example, nods to textual hybridity when he writes, "In *Cane*, Toomer attempts to enact a disruption of social boundaries through literary

form by exploding the genre borders of fiction, lyric poetry, and drama. By forcibly bringing together the disparate elements of the text, Toomer exposes false dichotomies and separations that are both literary and social” (275). And Whalan argues that *Cane* is “a text structurally and thematically committed to hybridity”—a claim that he supports with a reading of the text’s gaps: “*Cane* attempts to take the position of what George Hutchinson has called a ‘biracial’ text—a text that is both white and black, with a correspondingly ‘biracial’ audience—that makes its gaps and silences so much more pronounced, and so much more structurally central, than most other works produced in the period” (209, 216). These efforts from Peckham and Whalan—and, for that matter, Hutchinson—again demonstrate the difficulty scholars have met with treating *Cane*’s formal complexities and for interpreting their ramifications for the text’s social critiques. Moreover, in their figurations of hybridity and fusion, this scholarship also represents one side of the powerful dialectical tension of modernism—the pull toward homogenization—that typified the period and that Toomer was certainly writing against.

But arguments for *Cane*’s textual fusion simply do not obtain, as I have tried to demonstrate. Karen Jackson Ford, in her book that reprioritizes the role of poetry in *Cane*, argues against the hybridity of the text: “In fact, the argument of *Cane* resides in the contrast of genres rather than in their combination,” she writes, adding that “notwithstanding excellent recent scholarship on *Cane* that explores its efforts to break out of the fiercely inadequate binarisms of American racial discourse, I argue that *Cane*’s generic multiplicity amounts not to formal hybridity but to formal essentialism” (13, 17). The formal politics of *Cane* certainly do reject traditional binarisms of American discourses on race—not with a hybrid refusal of binaries, but with a constellar

model that widens the field of discussion. Accordingly, we should replace the figuration of hybridity with that of the network to understand Toomer's theorization of race.

Readings of *Cane* very often follow this logic: that the form—whether one reads it as a binary relation of prose and verse, a hybrid unity of different texts, and so on—stands in allegorically for Toomer's views on race. Ford's rejection of the hybridity model, then, offers a crucial pivot to draw upon in reformulating the text's formal-racial aesthetics-politics. If in fact the dominant aesthetic model in *Cane* is the network instead of the hybrid—what Ford calls the text's "generic multiplicity"—and if we can extrapolate that formal networking to a theorization of race, we arrive at a major intervention for how the text conceives of race and nation. We do not have to follow Ford to her conclusion of "formal essentialism," which, extrapolated to race, would carry the infelicitous tag of essentialism—as if Toomer's vision of race were predicated on some kind of stability of racial identity and the inevitability of racial conflict. Rather, rendering American race relations in the parameters of "generic multiplicity," in other words as a network, allows the text to offer a nuanced vision of American race relations that operates at two levels.

First, if we read *Cane*'s "generic multiplicity" as an allegorical statement on race, then the network becomes a figure for all of the United States's racial and ethnic diversity that negotiates the central dialectic of modernism: that between homogeneity and dispersal. This reading is staked more on the allegorical level of form than on the level of plot and character, though we can still see such a racial interdependence in the story of Becky, "the white woman who had two Negro sons" and who, though exiled by both white and black communities, is clandestinely supported by both communities—to

name just one example of a localized reading of racial interdependence in the text. Drawing from the text's formal schemes of interdependence, a networked configuration of races offers many significant re-conceptualizations of the possibilities for American culture. A model of decentralization, the network disperses whites' hegemonic power across the racial spectrum of the nation. This of course does not change the reality of juridical or economic inequalities of the races, but it does offer a utopian model to strive toward. Most importantly, the network model radically challenges the mode of interaction between the races—especially compared to the hybridity model to which many readers of *Cane* subscribe. Instead of the hybridity model's dubious analogue of racial fusion, the network offers a model of interdependence—one that allows for the tradition of group identity, but demands the cooperation of discrete racial and ethnic traditions in the “group-life” of the nation. Such a model of interconnection and interdependence makes the network an attractive figure by which *Cane* can resolve the many cultural and racial tensions of the nation—and especially the abundance of those tensions in the Jim Crow South.

Second, the networked figuration also operates as a model for the relationship of the individual to the whole. *Cane*'s networked theorization of race honors Toomer's ostensibly contradictory investments in individualism and group identity. Whalan characterizes Toomer's letters as demonstrating a commitment “to individualism as inherent to an archetypally American identity” (4)—an apt description of Toomer, who so often chafed at group classifications. But that impulse, set alongside his intense interest in race politics during the writing of *Cane*, creates a node-network relationship that is of course the basic structure of the text itself. Just as in the network's figural resolution of

racial and cultural conflicts, the network offers a model to preserve individuality while recognizing the collective project of the “group-life.”

Toomer’s use of the network as a model for conceiving of the nation and its culture and of the individual’s relation to both again demonstrates Toomer’s association with the project of the Young America thinkers. Casey Nelson Blake characterizes that project as “a communitarian vision of self-realization through participation in a democratic culture” (2). And as we have seen, a large part of that work relied on networked figurations. Randolph Bourne and Waldo Frank took up Romain’s model of *unanimité* as one means of thinking such a “democratic culture,” and their interest in Romain marks but one facet of their attraction to network figuration. Bourne’s 1916 essay “Trans-National America” drew upon the figure of the network as he tried to reconceive of the nation as a “federation of cultures” that would allow the U.S. to become a “cosmopolitan federation of national colonies, of foreign cultures, from whom the devastating sting of competition has been removed” (115, 117)—a theorization that bears deep likeness to *Cane*’s networked theorization of the interdependence of races. Frank deployed the networked dynamics of *unanimité* as the model for *City Block*, but he also drew on the network in *Our America* (1919) to illustrate the enmeshed nature of the cultural constituencies of the U.S.—offering an equal claim to “American culture” for Puritan New England, the American Southwest, industrial Chicago, and so on. And so the influence of Romain’s *unanimité* was but one strain of the network thinking being performed by the Young Americans.

With these Young America forebears in mind, it is not surprising that Toomer would turn to a networked figuration to think the race relations of the nation. That *Cane*

sets about approaching that goal with such a wide array of networking devices—both in the text’s form and in its content—demonstrates the central dialectical tension of modernism, and shows how American modernists used networked figuration to mediate the dialectical tensions of homogeneity and dispersal, and shows how they could use the network as a model to think some of the most foundational conditions of the nation’s social organization. In the case of *Cane*, the network provided the model by which Toomer could theorize a paradigm for a new mode American community—one that negotiates the homogenizing impulse of assimilation and the opposite impulse toward an outright dispersal of racial and ethnic enclaves. And here the text’s modes of networking demonstrate the distinctly modern crossroads of politics and form—indeed, demonstrates the politics *of form*—as *Cane*’s formal strategies to negotiate the tendencies toward totalization and dispersal act not only as an aesthetic principle, but as a theorization of the nation.

CHAPTER 3
ANITA LOOS'S *GENTLEMEN PREFER BLONDES*

Anita Loos's *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* was never intended as anything more than a popular entertainment. Originally serialized in *Harper's Bazar*,¹ its first printing as a book in late 1925 sold out overnight, and *Blondes* eventually rang in second among the best-selling novels in the U.S. in 1926 (Carey 95, Churchwell 158). Loos also capitalized on *Blondes*'s franchising potential with dress materials, comic strips, a song by Irving Berlin, and even wall paper themed around her popular book (Loos, "Musical" 59). And the text itself was subject to franchising impulses. In 1926, Loos adapted *Blondes* into a short-lived play that failed after little more than a month and garners almost no mention in scholarship on Loos or in her biography. Malcolm St. Clair's 1928 film adaptation of *Blondes*, starring Ruth Taylor, is now completely lost, a casualty of the transition to talkies that survives only in the sketchy synopsis drawn by an anonymous theater musician (Thompson xxi).² A musical production starring Carol Channing that in 1949 began a 90-week run and a tour lasting another year revived the novel's enormous popularity and at the same time reinscribed it, substituting the 1950s bombshell for the 1920s flapper and a traditional romance for the original text's cynical view of sexual relationships. That reinscription was adopted by Howard Hawks's 1953 film, starring Marilyn Monroe and Jane Russell, that has cemented the popularity of the *Blondes* franchise.

¹ Daniel Tracy reminds us that "the magazine's title was spelled with only one 'a' until 1929" (139 n. 1).

² In *Lost Films*, Frank Thompson writes, "The last days of the silent era were tragic for so many motion pictures. Hastily released to the last theaters not wired for sound, many late silents had terribly short lives. In small towns, silent films flourished well into the thirties, but for the big markets like Los Angeles, Chicago, and New York, sound films were a fact of life by 1928. It is a bitter irony that the years that arguably represent the pinnacle of the art of the silent cinema have been so ravaged by loss" (xix).

The intense popularity of *Blondes* mirrors Loos's own celebrity stature. Her primary vocation was screenwriting, and her long career tallied some 152 screen credits—a figure that does not account for the innumerable projects on which she collaborated and consulted. Biographer Gary Carey writes that unlike many of her modernist peers she “didn’t think screenwriting beneath her” and “enjoyed writing for star personalities” like Joan Crawford (150). Aside from *Blondes* and its sequel, *But Gentlemen Marry Brunettes* (1928), Loos’s writings were limited to the occasional magazine column and a handful of Hollywood memoirs. As a successful screenwriter and authoress of a bestselling novel, Loos was a staple of the celebrity press, and was for a long time a person of interest in *Vanity Fair*. With each return to the *Blondes* franchise, her celebrity was rekindled such that when she died in 1981 the battle over her estate was the stuff of celebrity gossip (Carey 314-15). Even in *Blondes*’s reception by the modernist literati—letters of appreciation from James Joyce, William Faulkner, Aldous Huxley, and Edith Wharton are routinely observed in *Blondes* scholarship—an awareness of Loos’s celebrity is often present, with the letters sometimes even bordering on mash notes gushing over her celebrity status.³

Yet like specimens of a number of other American popular American forms including jazz, comic strips, and Hollywood film, Loos’s popular entertainment has been increasingly identified with literary modernism. Some of this is due to the obviously experimental nature of its use of narrative voice and perspective, and some to its sexual politics. But for my purposes, renewed attention to Anita Loos can help recover some of the moderns’ strategies of networked representation—particularly those operating in

³ As biographer Gary Carey notes, after he first met Loos, Huxley would write to his brother that “Miss Loos was ravishing. One would like to keep her for a pet” (189).

popular modernism. *Blondes* deals with the public spaces that were themselves constitutive of popular modernism. In staging a tension between public and private spaces, *Blondes* refigures the modernist dialectic of centralization and dispersal, with the public figuring the gravitational pull of social concentration and the private figuring the atomizing impulse of the private domesticity.

The relatively scant scholarship on *Blondes* tends to focus on feminist criticism, and with good reason: in dealing with sexuality and gendered work and anchoring itself around two remarkably independent women, the text easily lends itself to feminist readings. To complement that tradition of criticism, I want to explore *Blondes*'s use of public spaces that undermine the hierarchies of social class and the gendered norms of public and private spheres. It would be easy enough to see Lorelei Lee as a sort of Frankenstein's monster unleashed upon the elites of the Social Register, as Regina Barreca suggests in her introduction to the 1998 edition of the text. But the upheaval of social class and traditional gender norms is not the work of an isolated, rogue actor. Instead, Loos unsettles these social institutions by privileging a flattened, networked representation of the social, staged in large part in the contact zone of the hotel. Through Lorelei's adventures in these contact zones, Loos rethinks the American class system and women's roles in the public sphere, and provides one case study in the moderns' use of the network as a conceptual tool for thinking American culture.

All The World's A Ritz

Immediate responses to *Blondes* were intent on debating the text's merits and setting the standards for its eventual canonical evaluation. Probably because the Lorelei stories garnered such attention in *Harper's* circulation, reviews of the novels tended to be short, taking for granted readers' familiarity with at least the contours of the

characters and plot. This meant that the reviews did little more than observe the novel's publication and plot, avoiding any substantive discussion of the novel's stakes—perhaps an artful dodge on behalf of the reviewers, who may have been wary of addressing the text's scandalously sexual subtexts. A reviewer for the *Boston Evening Transcript* took the common tack of praising the book's humor and wit, with a vague remark on gendered reception perhaps nodding toward the saltier notes of the text: "It is rarely and sidesplittingly delightful: it is the kind of sly, sophisticated spontaneity that will make any man and most women roar with laughter not once but fifty times" (Rev. 8). P.C. Kennedy was mostly content to rest his praise on imitation of Loos's sly style:

I mean it is very difficult for gentlemen like I to review a book like *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*. I mean it is quite true that gentlemen do prefer blondes. So I mean gentlemen like I are just the same as other gentlemen, and would like to go shopping with blondes, but it seems as if blondes would rather go shopping with gentlemen who have got money than go shopping with gentlemen like I who have got brains. So I mean it seems as if there was a limit to almost everything. (142)

H.L. Mencken's review is notable in that he provided the material for Loos's first Lorelei story—at least according to Loos's rather unreliable autobiographical statements—and that his disdain for middle America colors the entire text. Carey even describes Loos as "a confirmed Menckenite" (86). Mencken sarcastically describes the text as a corrective: "It is farce—but farce full of shrewd observation and devastating irony. I commend it to rural Christians who would get an accurate view of life in New York in these gaudy days of moral endeavor" (Mencken 127). The reviews tend to observe Loos's comical use of malapropisms, misspellings, and poor grammar that undermine Lorelei's character, the self-fashioning nature of the protagonist, and the gold-digging element of the plot.

While reviewers were quick to frame *Blondes* as a satire and occasionally hinted at the sexual economy of the text, the object of Loos's satire was rather avoided. The general consensus of critics like Lucie Arbuthnot and Gail Seneca, Barreca, Susan Hegeman, and Maureen Turim is that the meat of the *Blondes* franchise—the novel paired with its film progeny—lies in the sexual freedom of Lorelei and her companion Dorothy, and in the havoc wreaked by the pair as they make conquests of men and countries alike. Written in the form of Lorelei's diary, *Blondes* foregrounds the sly manipulations of the aspiring authoress as she angles for material gain—and leaves readers to guess at whatever it is she does on her end of the bargain. According to Lorelei's worldview, “kissing your hand may make you feel very very good but a diamond and safire bracelet lasts forever” (Loos, *Blondes* 55). Her clear-eyed, parodic depiction of traditional marital contract relations—the exchange of sex for material security—is at the center off all of Lorelei's relationships and much of her conflict with Dorothy, whose primary interest in men, Lorelei suspects, has little to do with their pocketbooks. Moreover, as Barreca notes, “Lorelei transforms those elements most feared by most women of her day—independence, sexual attractiveness, male attention, a life uncluttered by family ties—into what she desires; in other words, she turns everything that could possibly intimidate her into something that will aid her” (xviii). In other words, her defining characteristic is her refusal to be confined to private domestic roles, and her adventures in the public sphere celebrate an independence many women of the period would find daunting. Given its focus on sexual politics and the centrality of its same-sex friendship, *Blondes* is understandably a magnet for feminist criticism.

But Lorelei and Dorothy are not content to wreak havoc only upon sentimental sexuality and the traditional gender roles of heterosexual relationships. They are also equally set on wreaking havoc upon social class. The upheaval of social class is in part evident in the plot's narrative of social ascension: in Lorelei's repeatedly stated interest in entering the lofty ranks of the Social Register, in her pervasive anxiety over middle-class strategies of improvement, and in her calculated accumulation of material capital and Dorothy's pursuit of cultural capital—what Barreca refers to as “the socially disruptive nature of Loos's characters” (xiv). But an equally important part of *Blondes's* disruption of the class system is Lorelei's and Dorothy's constant befriending of service workers, and their social planning that stages contact zones for the refined elites and the salty members of the working and middle classes—a paradox of ascension and flattening that that I will address later. These contact zones are more than comic sequences to display Loos's wit and humor by lampooning the social faux pas that ensue when classes meet. Instead, they are indicative of the text's networked relationship of classes. And to fully understand the operation of these contact zones, we need to reflect on the symbolic import of hotels in turn-of-the-century American culture.

The Ritz, for Lorelei, stands as the embodiment of prestige and wealth, and it is the setting for many of her exploits in the U.S. and throughout her Grand Tour. Lorelei even establishes her own social advancement with a casual reference to the Ritz in the text's very first sentence: “A gentlemen friend and I were dining at the Ritz last evening and he said that if I took a pencil and a paper and put down all of my thoughts it would make a book” (Loos, *Blondes* 3). But the Ritz of course was also a benchmark of

broader signification. Turn-of-the-century art critic Bernard Berenson coined the term “Ritzonia” in reference to the famously luxurious chain of hotels, and the term captures the allure that the Ritz franchise had during the 1920s, standing for many—especially writers like Fitzgerald and Hemingway, who fawned over the bar at Paris’s Ritz during their days on the Left Bank—as the epitome of high living during the carefree Roaring 20s (Montgomery-Massingberd 147, 153). But Loos’s use of the Ritz was more than a topical marker of the day’s excesses. Lorelei’s constant invocation of the Ritz draws on the figural power of the grand hotel—also referred to as the palace or imperial hotel—that dates back to the Gilded Age, and on the distinctly democratized formation of the hotel that dates back to the earliest days of the republic.

It is easy to forget, given the atomizing nature of the motor hotel and the faster paces of business travel and tourism that prevail today, that until the middle of the 1900s the hotel was widely considered a public space⁴—even in the case of wildly decadent, inaccessible institutions like the Ritz franchises or the Waldorf. The clash between the public nature of its spaces and the inherently private nature of the hotel made it a contested field that held Americans’ attention. In *The American Scene* (1907), his account of returning to the U.S. after some 25 years of living in England, Henry James finds the hotel a central feature of modern American life, writing that “the present is more and more the day of the hotel,” and he seems surprised that vulgar Americans could have produced the aesthetic grandeur of the Waldorf-Astoria, which he describes as “a synonym for civilization”—or at least as a sign that the U.S. was

⁴ Alexis Gregory attributes the decline of the hotel’s public nature with its trend toward “greater personalization by breaking up interior space: a single floor might now be endowed with a concierge, private elevator, and its own room service” (18).

emerging to have a “civilization” to rival those of Europe (73). But historians are also quick to point out—sometimes with alarming notes of American exceptionalism—that the hotel derived a uniquely democratic character from its public spaces. Jefferson Williamson’s *The American Hotel: An Anecdotal History* (1930), a sepia-toned remembrance of hotels past, argues that unlike Old European lodging institutions that were exclusively the domain of the elites, America’s hotels “were built for equalitarian enjoyment [...] Indeed, the public could enjoy much in America’s hotels without its costing them a cent—the lobby, for example, and even the bar-room” (9). Moreover, he writes, hotels were the undisputed hubs of social activity in urban communities:

Then, too, there was the fact that America’s hotels were the great social centers of the general public, the favorite places for balls, banquets, and other affairs. This was a heritage of the old inn days, when there was a lack of private mansions in which social affairs could be held on any sizable scale. Democracy’s leaven, admitting all classes to these events, made it necessary to use the Long Rooms of the inns. In addition to being the accepted centers of social activity, the hotels were also the centers of political, business, and other forms of activity. (Williamson 9)

According to A.K. Sandoval-Strausz, the singular historian to focalize on the institutional history of the hotel, social functions at hotels were not exclusively the domain of the elites, but were also organized by political parties and trade groups ranging from fire departments to manufacturers’ associations to bankers’ organizations—functions the hotel still sponsors today, but that were considered vital elements of public culture in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Because they were social centers for travelers and locals alike, hotels acted as contact zones along two planes, putting individuals into contact with each other, and putting a community into contact with the nation. Sandoval-Strausz writes that this role in facilitating contact was the primary identity of hotels through the early twentieth

century: “A hotel’s public spaces were the heart and soul of the establishment: the places where people spent their time, the part observers said the most about, the areas of the liveliest sociability and innovation” (165). Beginning in the early 1800s, hotels aggressively created these contact zones with spaces designed for expressly public functions. Sandoval-Strausz, arguing that hotels during this period were spatially enacting the ideals of Jacksonian democracy, writes that lobbies, bars, and parlors were designed spaces of social heterogeneity that were more closely associated with the hotel than the accommodations of private guest rooms. Reading rooms, organized more for business than for generic sociability, were another facet of the hotel’s public spaces. Above all, the dining rooms emphasized egalitarian sociability—so much so that one journalist referred to them as “the tangible republic” (Williamson 210)—in large part due to the American plan, the meal plan that prevailed in American hotels through the 1910s. It consisted of four mammoth meals throughout the day, served for a flat rate included in the cost of the room upon long tables that spanned the length of the dining room. While Sandoval-Strausz concedes that this free-for-all arrangement “was hardly conducive to good table manners,” he positions it as central to the hotel’s construction of public space, because it necessitated contact between strangers at the table (169).

While staying at a hotel was mostly an exclusive affair that demonstrated the private nature of the hotel, participating in these public spaces was not—a key distinction to make in the hotel’s claim for democratized ideals. Sandoval-Strausz, comparing average hotel prices with prevailing wage rates in the 1800s, estimates that only about 20% of Americans could afford a hotel stay—a minority further limited by the

racial segregation of hotels (64-65). But hotels found ways of maintaining a broad base of support: lobbies, lounges, and parlors were consistently full of non-residents, small exhibitions were held to increase foot traffic inside the hotel, and drinks at the bar and meals in the dining hall were priced to a wide audience—in large part because selling drinks was usually the hotel's most profitable operation (Sandoval-Strausz 65, 168). In fact, as Alexis Gregory notes, bar sales were so integral to the hotel's finances that Prohibition sent many hotels into bankruptcy (27-28). So while an extended stay was out of reach for most, any reasonably dressed white person could make use of the hotel's facilities—almost as if they were literally public facilities. Because these spaces facilitated exchanges from individuals of a variety of backgrounds and created a democratized, if exclusively white, social heterogeneity, Sandoval-Strausz appraises the hotel's contact zone as a precursor to modern cosmopolitanism:

[H]otels created what might be called a multiplier effect: because people came to the same hotel spaces for many different reasons, there was constant crossing and commingling that exposed people to unexpected individuals and ideas. Someone who went to a hotel for a political caucus would also encounter travelers, their unfamiliar accents or foreign languages, and their styles of dress and comportment; by the same token, a person who ventured into a hotel for a shot of whiskey might thereby come into contact with antiliquor activists, itinerant physicians, society debutantes, or revivalist preachers. In short, hotels both focused and amplified the transformative power of human interaction. (261)

While the exclusivity of a hotel's guest rooms reinforced class hierarchy, the public rooms fostered an aggregation characterized more by social diversity and heterogeneity than class uniformity.

The uniquely public environment of the hotel spaces was a common figure in literature of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, made all the more dynamic by the tension between these public spaces and the private nature of the hotel.

In Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* (1900), for example, various New York hotel lobbies serve as resting places for George Hurstwood when he needs refuge from the cold as he scours the city for jobs, offering stark contrasts between the success he aspires to—and the status Carrie requires of their relationship—and his downward mobility. In “Advertisement for the Waldorf-Astoria” (1931), his polemical response to an ad for the opening of the decadent new hotel in the onset of the Great Depression, Langston Hughes challenged the disparity between the hotel's public access and its exclusivity, writing in direct address to the city's poor and unemployed, “Walk through Peacock Alley and get warm, anyway. You've got nothing else to do” (17). *Grand Hotel*, the 1932 film starring Greta Garbo and Joan Crawford, sets most of its action in public spaces like the lobby and the tea room, using the switchboard and the revolving door as transitional figures to pass between settings and narrative threads. Architect and theorist Rem Koolhaas pins a host of narrative production to the opening of the spectacular new Waldorf:⁵

In the thirties—when the second Waldorf is being built—the “Hotel” becomes Hollywood's favorite subject. In a sense, it relieves the scriptwriter of the obligation of inventing a plot. A Hotel *is* a plot—a cybernetic universe with its own laws generating random but fortuitous collisions between human beings who would never have met elsewhere. It offers a fertile cross section through the population, a richly textured interface between social castes, a field for the comedy of clashing manners and a neutral background of routine operations to give every incident dramatic relief. (149-50)

Though the conditions of the hotel's public role were changing by *Blondes's* 1920s, and certainly by *Grand Hotel's* 1930s, the cultural signification of the hotel as a public space

⁵ The new Waldorf's opening was such a sensational event that even President Hoover's remarks attended it. Discussing the hotel's centrality to American culture during the September 30, 1931 broadcast, Hoover said, “Our hotels have become community institutions. They are the center points of civic hospitality. They are the meeting place of a thousand community and national activities” (Wharton 532-33).

remained vibrant enough for Loos and others to draw upon it. Loos's use of the hotel's public spaces to figure social movement is part of a long tradition spanning the major periods associated with the turn of the century, as well as their formal genres.

At the same time that it figured the public in many narratives, hotels also continued to act as a staple trope of wealth and status. While *Grand Hotel* renders its spaces as contact zones between classes, nationalities, and belief systems, the hotel itself remains a symbol of class stratification—witness Otto Kringelein, a lower-class man with a terminal illness trying to live it up at the hotel in his final days, though constantly confronted with the fact that he is out of his element with the wonders of running water and electricity. And while the lobbies of New York's hotels provide Hurstwood respite from the cold city in *Sister Carrie*, hotels like the Wellington and the Waldorf also serve as markers of social ascension and material accumulation for Carrie, who is offered free lodging at the city's best hotels after she becomes a Broadway success—a common strategy used by hotels to boost their prestige by publicizing celebrity patrons. As Justin Kaplan notes, the famed Astor Hotel “figures as a landmark and measurement of success in nearly every one of Horatio Alger Jr.'s immensely popular strive-and-succeed, pluck-and-luck stories” (92). In Harold Frederic's *The Damnation of Theron Ware* (1896), a provincial young pastor pursues his love interest to the city, only to be overwhelmed by the “sense of metropolitan affluence in the very air” that attends her hotel (313). In Willa Cather's “Paul's Case” (1920), a young runaway thief lands in New York where he fulfills his dreams of wealth and splendor at the Waldorf, awed by the jetset class. The allure of wealth, status, and spectacle associated with the hotel in this

line of representation is, of course, the motivating factor in Lorelei's infatuation with the Ritz and other grand hotels throughout *Blondes*.

These two literary traditions—the hotel figuring the public, and the hotel signifying the prestige of private patrons—converge in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, where Lorelei's adventures in the public sphere flout class stratification and gender norms. Lorelei uses casual references to the Ritz to impress readers of her diary, and she manipulates the Ritz's spaces to convince potential suitors that she is a person of note. In fact, her brand allegiance is so great that the Ritz is a prominent part of nearly every stop on her grand tour of Europe—financed by one suitor, Gus “The Button King” Eisman, as a ploy to distract her from a rival suitor, the novelist Gerry Lamson. With Dorothy as her traveling partner, Lorelei leaves New York for England, disembarking on the transatlantic oceanliner *The Majestic*, which she is quick to liken to her familiar hotel, saying “you would not know it was a ship because it is just like being at the Ritz” (19). Indeed there is a Ritz restaurant on board the ship, where Lorelei hatches a ruse to get the upper hand on a former adversary by gaining his confidence, learning his state secrets, and passing them on to a British operative aboard the ship. The duo's first stop in London is the Ritz, where they make a celebrity sighting of Fanny Ward, and likewise the first attraction in Paris is its Ritz Hotel, where Lorelei and Dorothy socialize with celebrity types at the bar. But when she arrives in “the Central of Europe,” the leg of the tour that takes her to Munich, Vienna, and finally to Budapest, references to the Ritz are few and far between. Her hotel in Munich is unnamed, in Vienna she stays at the Bristol Hotel, and the Ritz in Budapest is an astonishing exception to the rule: “So we will soon be at the Ritz hotel again and I must say it will be delightful to find a Ritz hotel right in

the central of Europe” (Loos, *Blondes* 97). Relatively unexplored compared to the other cities she visits, Budapest—“Buda Pest,” as she calls it—only offers one attraction, the hotel, that warrants mention in Lorelei’s travel diary.

The Ritz occupies a special place in Lorelei’s travels, conferring prestige not only on her, but on the cities that host them. When in London and Paris she observes the Ritz as her first stop, it is not merely to check in and drop her luggage. Instead, the Ritz is an attraction all by itself. In Paris, for example, Lorelei writes, “So we came to the Ritz Hotel and the Ritz Hotel is devine. Because when a girl can sit in a delightful bar and have delicious champagne cocktails and look at all the important French people in Paris, I think it is devine” (Loos, *Blondes* 51-52). As in London, she loiters around the hotel, clinging to its familiar environs, before adventuring outside to tour the city. Lorelei’s fixation on the Ritz during her tour is of course part of Loos’s humorous lampooning of her lack of cultural sophistication. Lorelei may praise the Paris Ritz as “devine,” but she remarks that the Tower of London “really is not even as tall as the Hickox building in Little Rock and would only make a chimney on one of our towers in New York,” and the primary attraction in Paris is “Coty and Cartier,” where she believes “we were seeing something educational at last and our whole trip was not a failure” (Loos, *Blondes* 40, 52).

But Lorelei’s comical fixation on the Ritz also has the decidedly staid effect of mapping distributions of wealth. When she arrives in the Central of Europe—a leg of the tour that conspicuously groups together the former Central Powers—the relative absence of the Ritz is striking. Instead of the fabulous decadence of a grand hotel, the first sight she observes in Germany is hard labor—a brutal women’s work that gives

Lorelei slight pause to consider her own privilege. Looking out the window of her passing train, she sees something “really quite unusual. Because it was farms, and we saw quite a lot of girls who seemed to be putting small size hay stacks onto large size hay stacks while their husbands seemed to sit at a table under quite a shady tree and drink beer” (Loos, *Blondes* 75). This scene sets the tone for the remainder of the trip, which Lorelei finds dingy and uncouth. The contrast with an establishing scene set in a Ritz Hotel is telling, because it shows how the presence of the hotel is vital to Lorelei’s mapping of wealth, acting as nodes on her network of the visible globe—a global scene from which the postwar, reparations-burdened Central Powers are largely absent.

While Lorelei and Dorothy have but a fleeting encounter with laborers during the train ride into Germany, knowable relationships with workers constitutes a major part of their experience within hotels—and a major part of their rejection of the grand hotel’s class stratification. For if the public spaces of the hotel are designed for meeting and mixing, a surprising number of the contacts Lorelei and Dorothy make in their Ritz-hopping adventures involve hotel service workers. In London, a bellhop named Harry is an integral part of Lorelei’s ruse to ensnare the aristocrat Sir Francis Beekman. Lorelei describes him as a friend “who is quite a nice boy who is called Harry and who we talk to quite a lot,” and relies on him to execute the plan to corner Beekman into claiming credit for sending orchids to Lorelei’s room—flowers that Lorelei paid for herself in a ploy to loosen up Beekman’s wallet with the ultimate goal of attaining a \$7,500 diamond tiara (Loos, *Blondes* 44). In Paris, Leon, a “waiter friend” whom they meet at the Ritz restaurant, serves as a confidant; he translates the dialogue between Robber and Louie, detectives hired by Beekman’s wife to recover the ill-got tiara, so that Lorelei can

anticipate their ruse with one of her own (Loos, *Blondes* 63). It is a trend continued in the 1928 sequel, and in some ways prequel, *But Gentlemen Marry Brunettes*, wherein Lorelei and Dorothy cozy up to Tony, a waiter at the Algonquin Hotel restaurant, to discuss “ideas” and later to make connections with the literati of the Algonquin Round-Table (Loos 139). And this is to say nothing of the numerous contacts the duo makes with workers outside of hotels. For example, Lorelei’s relationship with her maid Lulu is so close that she entrusts her with the all-important task of “education” and “improving her mind”: “I told Lulu to let all of the house work go and spend the day reading a book entitled ‘Lord Jim’ and then tell me about it, so that I would improve my mind while Gerry is away” (Loos, *Blondes* 13). At almost every stage of the novel, Lorelei and Dorothy have strong connections to the people who work to sustain their comfortable lifestyles.

To observe these relationships is not to imply that Lorelei and Dorothy are sympathetic with labor interests. In each case, a relationship with a worker is the means to an end: Harry is a role player in the orchids ruse, Leon is necessary for deciphering French, Tony is useful in cozying up to the Algonquin’s literary scene, and Lulu performs the duties of the household. But that is the case with all of Lorelei’s relationships, regardless of class, as each of her suitors serves as a path to some form of material gain. The important thing to take away from this set of relationships is that they are as sincere as any form of human interaction Lorelei knows. She refers to these workers as friends, and she and Dorothy relate to them earnestly, and without any condescension marking their class difference.

Such free exchanges with workers may reflect the anxieties over class that pervade *Blondes*. Lorelei’s fixation on “education” and “improvement” reflect a middle-

class sensibility that is a common subject in criticism. For example, Mark McGurl explains that in addition to Lorelei's quest for material accumulation, she pursues the immaterial values of middle class virtue: "Her tale is also conspicuously, if satirically, about the acquisition of culture, an aesthetic education Lorelei refers to as 'improving her mind'" (106). These middle-class keywords often act as code for the carefully avoided subject of sexual economy that permeates Lorelei's diary. For example, she writes that "when a gentlemen is interested in educating a girl, he likes to stay and talk about the topics of the day until quite late, so I am quite fatigued the next day," and of one suitor's rivalry she remarks, "Mr. Spoffard might not seem to understand why Mr. Eisman seems to spend quite a lot of money to get me educated" (Loos, *Blondes* 4, 87). And Loos's selection of Little Rock, Arkansas as Lorelei's birthplace is telling, as it sits right in the middle of the region that Mencken dubbed "the Sahara of the Bozart" in 1920, signaling Loos's adoption of Mencken's decidedly hostile stance toward the South. In the introduction to the twenty-second edition of *Blondes*, published in 1963, Loos writes that "I wanted Lorelei to be a symbol of the lowest possible mentality of our nation" and therefore "chose Little Rock for my heroine's early years" (Loos, "Biography" 55). Still later, she would say Mencken had a more direct hand in crafting Lorelei's lower-class background: "It was at a cocktail party that Menck gave me the idea of choosing Little Rock as the proper birthplace for the idiotic blonde whose story I was writing" (Loos, "Cocktail Parties" 95-96). But as Loos was well aware, Mencken's "Sahara" of intellectual and cultural production figured the cultural anxieties of class much more than it questioned regional intellectual capacities—"the poor white trash are

now in the saddle,” he wrote of one case study in Southern intellectual-cultural decline (186)—and those anxieties loom large in *Blondes*.

Lorelei is self-conscious of her class position, as her investment in middle-class methods of social ascension like “education” and “improvement” demonstrate. In one more direct case, she even attempts an outright revision of her own narrative: when reporters covering her engagement to the wealthy Reform advocate Henry Spoffard ask about what she did before becoming engaged, she tells them, “I was nothing but a society girl from Little Rock” (Loos, *Blondes* 100). Minting herself as a “society girl” raises the question of whether or not Lorelei has deceived herself into this historical revisionism, or if it is merely a bid to consolidate her engagement to Spoffard, positioning herself as socially equal to his WASPy family. Regardless of whatever degree of self-delusion there may be in Lorelei’s idea of her own class status, she at all times projects the glamour of a society girl, and her patronage of grand hotels is key to the realization of her WASPy aspirations. Not only does the Ritz offer the spectacle of wealth befitting the class status she desires, but it also affords her opportunities to mix with elites in the hotel’s public spaces.

While hotels offer Lorelei a chance to mix with service employees behind the scenes, they also offer her an opportunity to broadcast her status by ostentatious displays of mixing with elites and celebrities. In the London Ritz restaurant, Lorelei and Dorothy spot the famed vaudeville and silent film actress Fanny Ward, and hastily attach to her: “we asked to her to come over to our table and we were all three delighted to see each other. Because I and Fanny have known each other for about five years” (Loos, *Blondes* 34-35). The three of them get on so well that they go

shopping together, and Fanny teaches Lorelei some of her fashion tricks—a set of women adventuring outside of the private domestic sphere that is equally as important as the celebrity nature of the group. At the bar in the Paris Ritz, Lorelei and Dorothy again attach their social worth to that of celebrities in their proximity, with Lorelei’s trademark malapropisms: “I mean when a girl can sit there and look at the Dolly sisters and Pearl White and Maybelle Gilman Corey, and Mrs. Nash, it is beyond worlds” (Loos, *Blondes* 52). Lorelei recalls that the first time she saw her future husband was at the New York Ritz when he scorned the scandalous actress Peggy Hopkins Joyce out of his Reformist “Presbyterian” convictions. And when she finally breaks things off with Mr. Eisman, secure in her relational exchange with Spoffard, she softens the blow by offering herself as social capital for him: “I told him that he really ought to be very proud of me, because in the future, when he would see me at luncheon at the Ritz as the wife of the famous Henry H. Spoffard, I would always bow to him, if I saw him, and he could point me out to all of his friends and tell them that it was he, Gus Eisman himself, who educated me up to my station” (Loos, *Blondes* 121). In the short span of the novel, the Ritz’s public spaces see a revolution: Lorelei initially uses them to glean status and prestige from celebrities and elites with whom she brushes elbows, and ultimately she uses them to bestow her own social capital onto Eisman and others who could claim gainful connections to her.

In this sense, Lorelei’s use of the hotel’s contact zones is rather routine. She creates networks of social capital by creating and highlighting connections to the rich and famous. But when this behavior is paired with her affiliation with the service workers who help sustain these luxurious hotels and facilitate the elites’ contact sites,

Blondes rings an unexpected note in its own narrative of upward mobility: Lorelei's navigation of these public spaces signals a paradox of ascension and flattening. On the one hand, as we have seen, she uses these spaces to parade her own material and cultural accumulation and display her connections to the elites of the Social Register—and her very presence there completes her rise from her lowly roots in “Saharan” Arkansas. On the other hand, Lorelei persistently cultivates connections to the hotel's staff as if she were still maintaining connections with her lower-class history, and without a thought for the scorn WASP elites would have for such conduct. In both cases, she carefully develops social networks—a leisurely set to burnish her credentials of social capital, and a working set to help her establish those credentials. Situated between these two classes of networks, Lorelei acts as a pivotal nodal exchange, bridging the gap between elites and workers, simultaneously rising up the ranks of class hierarchy and flattening it with her ambivalent affiliations.

This phenomenon has been observed, if obliquely, in criticism of *Blondes*. As I mentioned above, Barreca observes “the socially disruptive nature of Loos's characters.” And McGurl characterizes *Blondes* as preoccupied with “the problem of social indistinction and cultural leveling” as it satirizes mechanisms of distinction by imagining a context “where even morons like Lorelei Lee are encouraged to write books and even the Philadelphia social elite try their hand at film scenarios” (109). Aside from the mean-spirited tone and what sounds vaguely like a defense of class stratification, McGurl's narrative of “indistinction” and “leveling” fails to account for the distinctly networked nature by which it is achieved. For it is not only her undermining of traditional tools and practices of social distinction—her claim for authorial legitimacy, her

dubious means of “improving her mind,” her continual upbraiding of Dorothy’s “unrefined” behavior—that yield a leveling of the social hierarchy that Lorelei intends to climb. Lorelei achieves this flattening by drawing relational lines in all directions, with no regard for class status.

But it is equally important to observe that Lorelei conducts these globetrotting adventures in the hotel’s public spaces as a single, unchaperoned woman. In other words, the hotel provides a space for Lorelei to finesse the gendered boundaries of public life and private domesticity. Much of the feminist criticism of *Blondes* is interested in how Lorelei manages to avoid the suffocation of being a “kept” woman, and her negotiation of these boundaries is facilitated in large part by the public spaces of the hotel. Noting another context of Lorelei’s use of public spaces, Susan Hegeman, writes that *Blondes* arrives in a moment when the workplace was becoming another site of public engagement: “growing numbers of women were finding it either desirable or necessary to find work outside the home. Though many kinds of factory work were being gradually closed to women, jobs as secretaries, file clerks, stenographers, and switchboard operators were plentiful, enticing young women like Lorelei into ‘business colledges’ across the country” (536). Lorelei has such a working life in her backstory, but her role as secretary came to a rather abrupt end when her boss found himself shot by her revolver: “it seems that I had a revolver in my hand and it seems that the revolver had shot Mr. Jennings,” she recalls (Loos, *Blondes* 25). Aside from her brief stint as a secretary, Lorelei’s primary navigation of public spaces takes place in more leisurely contexts of travel, parties, and hotels. While Dorothy’s putative function on the Grand Tour is to act as proxy chaperone for Eisman, ever desirous of

keeping Lorelei under his control, she and Lorelei both make a mockery of Eisman's paternalistic impulses by using his patronage to fund their scandalous exploits. Openly mixing in the hotels—with workers and celebrities alike, none of whom, one suspects, would receive Eisman's approval—the two enjoy an easy freedom of movement that is a constitutive element of the hotel's public spaces. Their ability to maintain that freedom without conceding their aspirations for social ascension—in other words, to mix freely without tainting themselves with working class indecorousness or worse, associating themselves with prostitution—would be nearly impossible without the hotel's seal of propriety.

In a way, then, the winking nature of the text comports with a winking nature of the hotel that involves its strange role as a public and private space. Loos's sly prose routinely suggests Lorelei's scandalous behavior, and similarly the grand hotel, at the same time that it was a stout marker of wealth and respectability, often connoted scandalous hijinks. Just as today the "do not disturb" door hanger evokes an illicit brand of conduct that is associated with the hotel, the hotel—ranging from the grandest to the most pedestrian—has long had a reputation for unseemly behavior that figures into Loos's use of hotel settings. Evidence of such conduct is hard to come by for obvious reasons, but Sandoval-Strausz writes that there is a long record of divorces predicated on hotel-related testimony that bears out the hotel's role as a site of illicit affairs, and he notes that prostitution was so closely related to hotels that upstanding women had to follow strict propriety codes to ensure not to be mistaken for working women. He writes, "The first word on sex in hotels belongs to a minister who preached that hotels were immoral. Asked why, he replied that any establishment that sold liquor

and contained so many beds had to be sinful” (Sandoval-Strausz 204)—a context that of course predates the Prohibition era of *Blondes*, but that nonetheless establishes the hotel’s iconography in American culture. Lorelei surely navigated propriety codes so as to avoid the taint of prostitution, but nevertheless these very significations draw on the hotel’s paradoxes—public spaces, private rooms, and the risk of private assignments being made public.

This seedy side of the hotel gives it a quite different function as a contact zone. As Sandoval-Stausz writes, the hotel at the turn of the century was a contact zone ripe for cosmopolitan encounters, where people could go expecting the unexpected—individuals and ideas equally exotic. And I might add that its reputation for illicit sex in its private spaces made the hotel a contact zone not only of exotic, but also erotic encounters. While her activities at the hotel never directly border on indecency, Lorelei’s use of the hotel to disrupt the gendered boundaries of public and private add another dimension to *Blondes*’s figuration of public spaces. With its public restaurants, lobbies, and bars, along with its private and potentially scandalous chambers, the hotel provides a perfect field for Lorelei to exert herself as an unkept woman and as a social climber. In her pursuit of the wealth, prestige, and power signaled by the grand hotel, Lorelei challenges the public and private norms of gender, and inadvertently reorganizes class stratification into a networked field in the hotel’s public spaces. This is the true mark of Lorelei’s social ambition: she is not, in fact, a social climber, but a networker of the social sphere.

Cocktail Parties, Class, And Networks

In her later years, after her screenwriting career had faded and her days as a novelist were well behind her, Loos turned to writing a set of memoirs and to regular

work writing columns and guest pieces for various magazines. Here Loos's conservatism emerges fully in her nostalgia for the 1920s: nostalgia for romance, which she believes declined with the passing of the 20s; nostalgia for the vitality of the 20s, against the perceived sterility of the 1970s and 80s; nostalgia for the disappearing Renaissance Man; nostalgia for the old frontiers of 1920s sexuality, indicated in the snarky, and sometimes suspicious tone of her revised catchphrase, "gentlemen prefer gentlemen." In the late 1960s, she even wrote a series of columns for *Family Weekly* giving advice to modern housewives on such issues as avoidance of nervous breakdowns and the governance of unruly youth—advice that seems well beyond her authority given that Loos scrupulously avoided domestic responsibilities throughout her life, and given that her celebrity was predicated on her association with the ribald lifestyle of the flapper.

"Cocktail Parties of the Twenties," published in *Gourmet Magazine* in 1970, offers a glance at how her view of class upheaval continued even into this period of conservatism, and sheds light on some of *Blondes's* textual dynamics. The beginning of the article reads like an outmoded celebrity's final appeal for relevance to a new generation, opening with a catalogue of must-have guests to create a successful party: Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald, Mencken, George Gershwin, Tallulah Bankhead, and Horace Liveright, as well as a supporting cast of "oodles and oodles of flappers and equal oodles of college men down from Harvard and Yale or up from Princeton" (Loos, "Cocktail Parties" 97). Loos dutifully dishes on celebrity gossip to chronicle the scandalous behavior befitting the Prohibition-drunk glamour of a Jazz Age party. For example, she writes that the Fitzgeralds "would always compete with each other in

bloodcurdling misbehavior; if Scott was inspired to climb out on a high window ledge, Zelda could always find some excuse to take off her clothes” (Loos, “Cocktail Parties” 95). But the standard reminiscence of bygone celebrity gives way to quasi-sociological study when Loos turns to the role of the requisite bootlegger at such gatherings.

The bootlegger, she says, was an integral part of any Prohibition-era cocktail party, because despite the host’s best planning efforts, the liquor would inevitably run out—inevitably, at least, if it was any party worth mention. The bootlegger, Loos writes, “was welcome first of all as a lifesaver and then, being a man of important social connections, he frequently remained as a guest” (“Cocktail Parties” 98). Eventually the liquor would run out again and the bootlegger would send a confederate for reinforcements—a process that could potentially be repeated indefinitely, bringing more and more of the bootlegging workforce into the cocktail party. And the bootleggers were not the only unexpected guests at the party. Neighbors would eventually call the police with noise complaints, and the police “might enter with a rather rough admonition of ‘What do youse guys think you’re up to anyhow?’ This, however, was merely to alibi the fact that they were crashing. One look at Zelda in the buff was all they needed to remain as guests of honor” (Loos, “Cocktail Party” 98). And so the party would go on with an unpredictable mix of Park Avenue elites, law enforcement, and underworld bootleggers.

In Loos’s account, the introduction of bootleggers and policemen into the celebrity soiree was an injection of pure “virility”—a hypermasculine sort of sexuality that she implicitly contrasts with the presumably effeminate masculinity of her celebrity cohort of Fitzgeralds, Menckens, and Gershwins. It is a conservative brand of manhood that she

idealizes, describing, perhaps to titillate the domestic readership of *Gourmet Magazine*, the collection of manly men as “the most entrancing bevy of square-shooting male sexpots [that] would recharge a party with enough electricity to make it go for a week” (Loos, “Cocktail Party” 98). It is something of a cliché—and one suspects, an overstatement if not an outright untruth—of the Prohibition era that defiance of the Volstead Act encouraged an unprecedented intermingling of different sorts of people. But regardless of the accuracy of Loos’s memory of these scenes, the introduction of bootleggers and policemen into the celebrity gathering remakes the cocktail party as a scene of heterogeneous mixing akin to the public spaces of a hotel. Of course nothing involving a bootlegger could be forthrightly public during Prohibition, but Loos’s description of the 1920s cocktail party maintains the spirit of those public spaces, acting like a contact zone instead of a closed private event. Her affinity for the heterogeneous nature of the cocktail party represents her interest in undermining class stratification with models of social exchange that more resemble a network.

The atmosphere Loos describes for the prototypical 1920s cocktail party—the continual resupplying of liquor for a party that could last indefinitely, the hegemonic expansion to draw in ever more guests, the volatile mix of different people—describes several scenes in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, as well. For example, after one particularly lively party full of “all the brainy gentlemen I could think up,” Lorelei cryptically remarks, “Heaven knows how long it will take to get the chandelier fixed” (Loos, *Blondes* 7). And the party environment attends most of the rest of Lorelei and Dorothy’s breezy adventures through society, with liquor and new acquaintances never far from sight.

The cocktail party atmosphere is exemplified in Lorelei's debut party, which Dorothy decides is necessary after Lorelei rewrites herself as "a society girl from Little Rock." The notion of such a party is farcical in that Lorelei is well past the age of debut, and her widespread sexual experiences further undercut any idea that she is only beginning to enter adulthood. Lorelei's debut, which takes place at her apartment over a span of three days, is not a cocktail party per se, but it does involve all of the elements Loos would later prescribe for a successful cocktail party: social elites, bootleggers, law enforcement, and a considerable degree of debauchery. Dorothy stocks the party with practically the entire membership of the Racquet Club, all of the dancers from the Follies, the Prohibitionist Judge Schultzmeyer, and bootlegger Joe Sanguinetti and his Silver Spray Club, which Lorelei pithily notes "is not even mentioned in the Social Register" (Loos, *Blondes* 105). The debut is such an event that the celebrity press covers it with rave reviews of Lorelei's antics. Afterward, Lorelei writes, "So my debut has really been very novel, because quite a lot of the guests who finished up at my debut were not the same guests that started out at it, and it really is quite novel for a girl to have so many different kinds of gentlemen at her debut" (Loos, *Blondes* 106). Lorelei seems to take pride in the multivalent contacts that she is able to generate and sustain.

Aside from its epic duration, the party is noteworthy for two disruptive functions. First, Lorelei's debut demonstrates a high degree of class intermingling, comparable to her navigation of the hotel's public spaces. During the preparation for the party, Dorothy anticipates that the integration of the Racquet Club and the Silver Spray Club would be a truly distinctive accomplishment: "Dorothy said that by the time the party got into swing, anyone would have to be a genius if he could tell whether he belonged to the

Racquet Club, the Silver Spray Club, of the Knights of Pythias” (Loos, *Blondes* 105). Anyone would have to be a genius, in other words, to parse out the partiers into their distinct classes. This interpenetration manifests in one instance, wherein the quartet of the Silver Spray Club merges with that of the Racquet Club and the new ensemble quarrels over pieces to perform, as “Joe’s bootleggers said that the Racquet club boys wanted to sing songs that were unrefined, while they wanted to sing songs about Mother” (Loos, *Blondes* 107). The squabble not only obscures class boundaries as the two clubs converge into one unit, but it also upends the traditionally classed assumptions about vulgarity and refinement.

Second, Lorelei’s debut demonstrates her blurring of public and private gender norms. A debut, of course, typically inaugurates a brief period in a woman’s public life in the interregnum of the private lives to be led under father and husband. That public nature is reinforced by the heavy coverage the debut receives from the celebrity press. But more importantly, the debut party signals Lorelei’s avoidance of becoming a kept woman. The party is conceived so that she can trick now-fiancé Spoffard into breaking off the engagement so she can sue him for breach of faith. Shortly after accepting his proposal, Lorelei writes, “it might really be better if Henry should decide that he should not get married, and he should change his mind and desert a girl, and it would only be right if a girl should sue him for breach of promise” (98). Dorothy’s plans for the debut party fall into Lorelei’s lap, corresponding perfectly with her need to set up an escape clause from the impending marriage. As with the public spaces of the hotel, the debut party provides a space in which Lorelei challenges her confinement to the private sphere, and provides her with an opportunity to invent some kind of arrangement by

which she can finesse the boundaries of public and private gender norms—an arrangement she ultimately finds in *Blondes's* conclusion, wherein she arranges that her marriage to Spoffard allows her to pursue a career in Hollywood.

Of the debut party, Barreca writes, “Dorothy has created a little pocket of anarchy and gleefully intends to enjoy it” (xiv). The debut party’s subversion of class hierarchy and gender norms is anarchic, to be sure, but it is by no means “a little pocket” of *Blondes*. Rather, it is the general rule of the text. As in the public spaces of the hotel, the space of Lorelei’s debut party creates such an entangled web of contacts and exchanges that muddies the boundaries of public and private, and that for at least a short while flattens class stratification into a network, framing each individual’s relation to another not in a vertical orientation, but according to a constellar model.

Describing a different text’s deployment of the cocktail party as a setting, Michael Denning considers the implications of the party’s figuration of the social. He argues that the basic social unit of John Dos Passos’s *U.S.A.* trilogy (1930-36) is the cocktail party, which effectively destroys coherent connections between characters by diminishing the connective functions of family, community, industry, or shared plot. Denning writes that in *U.S.A.* “the cocktail party stands as a substitute for narratives of home and family, an alternative to the domestic space that usually organizes the novel. Dos Passos’s cocktail parties mediate between public and private spaces: the rooms and homes are interchangeable with those of restaurants and bars” (Denning 183). *U.S.A.* and Denning’s criticism of it are the subject of a later chapter, but for now I want to argue that Loos manages a similar substitution, displacing mediations predicated on class and gender with the free-flowing networked mediations of the cocktail party and the hotel.

I concede that it may be naïve to read cocktail parties as truly flattened social spaces where interrelationships are defined by the linkages of networks instead of class stratification and gender norms. I suspect that even in Loos's prototypical cocktail party of the 1920s there was never a level field between the celebrity and the commoner had the bootlegger or policeman been privileged enough to stay around for a while—no matter how starkly naked Zelda Fitzgerald may have been at the time. But Loos's novel of social disruption insists on the question: what if social organization were based on the model of a hotel's public spaces, or a cocktail party, where heterogeneous mixing were the rule? What if the Lorelei Lees of the world were free to fraternize with service workers, bootleggers, and elites alike—and vice versa—with no regard for the confines of class or gendered boundaries of the public and the private?

Sarah Churchwell reads such class dynamics in the interplay between the Lorelei stories and the ads that accompanied them in their original serialization in *Harper's Bazar*. The ads marked their thoroughly middlebrow products as aristocratic, which she argues creates "an illusion of democratic aristocracy in which *Harper's* believes, but Loos does not. The democratic aristocrat is precisely the fantasy of the middlebrow, like the advertisement that pretends that people on Fifth Avenue eat Campbell's soup, too" (Churchwell 145). If the novel is truly invested in a democratized aristocracy—even if only as satire of dim cultural and intellectual "Saharans" like Lorelei—its corruption of the highbrow and the distinction of taste is not the only means of achieving it. This almost utopian potential is key to *Blondes's* treatment of public spaces and the making of social heterogeneity via networks.

Moreover, Loos's use of hotels and the cocktail party to blur the boundaries of public and private and create heterogeneous networks demonstrates the centrality of spatial dynamics to the moderns' theorization of networked organization. As I mentioned in the introduction, a central feature of the modern period was its lively public culture that grew out of newly crafted leisure time and the urban milieu, lit by advances in electrification and facilitated by the growth of public transportation. But the spaces of this public culture are immensely important to the cultural logic of modernism, as the public gatherings created a centralizing gravity that acted against the atomizing impulses of private domesticity. In other words, the tension between public culture and private domesticity maps rather neatly over the fundamental dialectical tension of modernism—centralization and dispersal, totality and fragmentation—and the networks of public and private that Lorelei manages to create in *Blondes* perform an important mediation of those polarities.

CHAPTER 4 JOHN DOS PASSOS'S *U.S.A.* TRILOGY

The literary history of John Dos Passos's *U.S.A.* trilogy (1930-36) is in some respects as epic as the work itself. Common, for example, is the position that Michael Denning takes on the trilogy's troubled relationship with critics over the tumultuous period of late modernism: "to put it crudely, his move to the radical right lost him his left-wing admirers, while the undisputed sense that his early works are his finest made him a difficult icon for the right [...]. Unlike many of his contemporaries, he did not move from a radical political art to an apolitical formalism, and thus never won the allegiance of formalist or aestheticist critics" (167). This trajectory, however, does not fully account for a spike in interest in the author and the trilogy in the early 1980s: a 1980 *Modern Fiction Studies* special issue dedicated to *U.S.A.*, Townsend Ludington's sprawling biography of Dos Passos of the same year, and chapters in several books throughout the decade. Nor does it account for the late 1990s revival in Dos Passos scholarship—perhaps partly fueled by the 1996 publication of a Library of America edition of the *U.S.A.* trilogy—in which Denning himself is a key figure. Yet on the whole these remain as minor peaks of interest, and in American literary scholarship the *U.S.A.* trilogy is not exactly gone, but is close to forgotten.

Perhaps more than any other modernist work, the *U.S.A.* trilogy insists on a totalizing vision of its fragments, and accordingly its form offers a framework that turn-of-the-century readers should recognize, if only implicitly, as a network construction. Built of four separate but integrated narrative modes, Dos Passos's trilogy imagines the nation as a clear articulation of the cultural logic of modernism: a dialectical tension between the tendency of dispersal and the desire to maintain some kind of unifying

identity for the nation. In this representation of national space, and especially U.S. history, Dos Passos explores the dialectic of fragment and totality that is the defining tension of American modernism. In a move that is representative of the centrality of networked figuration in high modernist formal experimentation, Dos Passos creates formal networks to mediate this dialectical tension, and then uses the trilogy's networked configuration as a conceptual tool to think not only the dynamics of national space, but also the workings of the study of history. The trilogy's formal networks, which in part develop characterological networks of fictional figures, place the network as a central device for thinking the American moderns' rapidly changing milieu.

A “Four-Way Conveyor System”

That the fragment is a standard trope deployed by the moderns is a truism among scholars of modernisms. The *U.S.A.* trilogy's intervention into modernist fragmentation is noteworthy, however, in its intensification of the formal experiments already seen in short story cycles like Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919) or in Jean Toomer's collage of poetry, prose, and drama in *Cane* (1923), to name just two of the most canonical examples. Moreover, Dos Passos's trilogy is equally intensive in its efforts to totalize its set of fragments into some kind of whole organism. To negotiate these two dialectical tendencies, fragmentation and totalization, the architecture of Dos Passos's narrative evokes the figure of the network as it circumscribes American history from 1900 through the late 1920s. Thomas Ludington, the authoritative biographer of Dos Passos, explains that Dos Passos conceived of the trilogy as a “series of reportages of the time” in which he was “trying to get something a little more accurate than fiction” (256). In pairing networked aesthetics with this historical project, Dos Passos offers something like a constellar model of the study of history.

The distinction of *U.S.A.*'s fragmentation lies in its experimental technique of employing four discrete modes for this historical narrative. As Denning notes, Dos Passos referred to the trilogy's structure as a "four-way conveyor system" comprised of some sixty-eight Newsreels, fifty-one Camera Eyes, twenty-seven biographical sketches, and fictional narratives centered on twelve anchoring character-threads (170). Denning argues convincingly that Dos Passos's architectural narration was designed as "a series of formal solutions to the problem of building a novel that culminates in the magical unity of the title itself, *U.S.A.*" (169). Indeed, each component of this architecture seems to perform a specialized task in the service of that totalizing narration, a design that Denning argues reflects an "aesthetic Taylorism" (170). The Newsreels offer newspaper copy, advertisements, and popular song lyrics to narrate the history and zeitgeist of the period. The Camera Eye, which scholars often recognize as a stream-of-consciousness rendering of Dos Passos's own life, narrates the lived experience of the period—if a lived experience limited to the author's biography. The biographical sketches outline a punctuated history via great-man-of-history portraits of Woodrow Wilson, Eugene Debs, Andrew Carnegie, Thorstein Veblen, and the Wright Brothers, to name but a few of the figures whom Dos Passos explores alongside their interventions into U.S. history and culture. The fictional component narrates the developments of the period through a matrix of characters experiencing different segments of the historical spectrum.

It bears noting that this "four-way conveyor system" was quite controversial among early reviews of the trilogy's volumes. Even to his contemporary readers, already accustomed to the moderns' revolt against verisimilitude, Dos Passos's four-way

conveyor presented a major interpretative challenge. Upton Sinclair's review of *The 42nd Parallel* (1930) for the *New Masses*, though perhaps not quite representative given his commitment to social realism, lashed out at Dos Passos's three non-fictional modes. Sinclair called the Newsreels "vaudeville material;" he said that insofar as the biographical sketches were relatively short "we don't mind them especially;" and he lamented that the Camera Eye passages bear no strong relation to the character-threads (88). Espousing a common ambivalence toward the "four-way conveyor system," Matthew Josephson's *Saturday Review* piece on *1919* (1932) treated the non-fictional modes as white noise, characterizing them as "a sort of vivid backdrop against which the characters pass in procession" (107). And it is telling that the British publisher of *The 42nd Parallel* wanted to eliminate altogether the Newsreels and Camera Eyes from their edition (Ludington 287).

Against these critiques we can contrast Malcom Cowley's *New Republic* review of *The Big Money* (1936), which addresses the complete trilogy's reliance on "technical devices" to make Dos Passos's architecture of history cohere, and he treats each of the four narrative modes to show their unique contributions to the text ("End of a Trilogy" 137-39). Cowley even revisited that review a year later to argue that the Camera Eye segments perform the function of maintaining interiority that prevents *U.S.A.* from being a mere "collective novel" ("Afterthoughts" 134). Cowley's persistent defense of Dos Passos's non-fictional modes should indicate the extent to which the ambivalence of Josephson's white-noise assessment prevailed among reviewers of the *U.S.A.* trilogy, which seems to indicate critics' bafflement at what common purpose these separate "conveyors" share.

What I find distinctive about this formal architecture is that it offers a networked vision of the United States and of narration itself. Dos Passos de-centers the character-threads by introducing that element third, behind the first volleys of Newsreels and the Camera Eye that inaugurate *The 42nd Parallel*. With the plot-driven narration marginalized from its usual position of authority, *U.S.A.* proceeds to locate its project in the interstices of the four narrative nodes that compose its vision of the United States.

In keeping with the Fordist language Dos Passos chose to describe the “conveyors” system, these four narrative modes indeed cooperate to produce the text by filling in the gaps left by the other modes, but the narration is not as strictly linear as the “conveyors” analogy would have it. Instead, the narrative modes stage a complicated tension between linear and constellar movement, much as the actual Fordist workplace did in its reliance on subsegmentation. On the one hand, each separate mode unfolds in roughly chronological order, in the movement of a conveyor. For example, the Newsreels start with the dawn of the new century, cover the tumult of the war years, and move on to the first Florida land boom and other hallmarks of the Roaring 20s. And the other narrative modes follow that trajectory, with the character-threads presenting minor exceptions in the movement from one dominant character to another that sometimes requires resetting history to get a character’s back-story. But on the other hand, the trilogy’s architecture replicates Fordism’s non-linear strategy of subsegmentation. The Fordist paradigm operates on the division of labor, where separate tasks are performed by separate workers on separate assembly lines, and that is precisely the model of Dos Passos’s architecture: a division of narrational labor that assigns four modes of representation to four distinct segments of narrative that move

along as conveyor belts that are paradoxically autonomous and independent. That Fordist interdependence of distinct narrative tasks sets up a constellar mode of production. In other words, the structure of the trilogy is that of a network comprised of four anchoring nodes.

We can see this networked narration on display in a sequence of each of the four modes in *1919*, with each mode providing a different treatment of the events of Armistice Day. In the fictional mode, the action of Armistice Day is related through Joe Williams, whom we first met as he deserted the merchant marine in Buenos Aires. Joe is in France when the news comes, and he enjoys the exuberant scene—“everybody was dancing in the kitchen and they poured the cook so many drinks he passed out cold and they all sat there singing and drinking champagne out of tumblers and cheering the allied flags that girls kept carrying through” (Dos Passos, *1919* 187)—partly with his trademark womanizing. Newsreel XXIX, which immediately follows the Joe Williams piece, conveys the objective history of the event with headlines reporting the actual signing of the Armistice as well as the riotous celebrations that accompanied it: “the arrival of the news caused the swamping of the city’s telephone lines”; “at the Custom House the crowd sang The Star Spangled Banner under the direction of Byron R. Newton the Collector of the Port”; “*Oh say can you see by the dawn’s early light*”; and so on (Dos Passos, *1919* 189). The thirty-sixth Camera Eye relates the experience of the event: “Hay sojer tell me they’ve signed an armistice tell me the wars over they’re takin us home latrine talk the hell you say” (Dos Passos, *1919* 191). The biographical sketch at the end of this sequence is a portrait of Woodrow Wilson, and while the Armistice itself gets only glancing treatment—“Almost too soon the show was

over” (Dos Passos, 1919 195)—the sketch neatly situates Wilson in the context of the empire building that would be the treaty’s most lasting legacy: alongside Clemenceau and Lloyd George, Wilson is one of “three old men shuffling the pack, / dealing out the cards” of imperial mapping (Dos Passos, 1919 197).

Still, the quadrangulated sequence of Armistice Day rather oversimplifies the networked narration that organizes *U.S.A.* Its sequential grouping, uninterrupted by other matters of history and experience that interpenetrate the trilogy, puts the mechanism of network narration on prominent display, but the sequence is not representative of the text’s architecture. The nodal formation of the four anchoring fragments rarely provides such a concise examination of one punctual moment with such tight thematic clustering. More often, *U.S.A.* displays a more diffuse, more truly constellar narration of a wide-ranging development in the United States’ first decades of the new century.

One of the more pronounced issues narrated across the breadth of the trilogy is the development of the public relations industry. The impact of public relations is demonstrated, in part, in the trajectory of the Newsreels across the trilogy. As Caren Irr shows, the arc of the Newsreels moves from news-related headlines to the “want ads, promotions of dancing lessons, celebrations of new auto parts” and other advertisements that dominate *The Big Money* (53). The Camera Eye follows this pattern, as brand recognition begins to enter the speaker’s subjectivity: “walk the streets and walk the streets inquiring of Coca-Cola signs Lucky Strike ads” (Dos Passos, *Big Money* 118). Curiously, Dos Passos’s biographical sketches do not feature a founder of the PR field—someone like Ivy Lee or Edward Bernays would not have

been surprising—but some of the later sketches do bear the suggestion of PR's influence. Henry Ford's sketch, for example, opens with the glamorizing account by a "featurewriter" whose profile of the auto magnate is equal parts advertisement for Ford and for one of his automobile prototypes: "the machine certainly went with a dreamlike smoothness. There was none of the bumping common even to a streetcar" (Dos Passos, *Big Money* 38). Stabilizing those diffuse engagements with public relations in the non-fictional modes is an anchoring thematization of PR across the character-threads. The sketches of J. Ward Moorehouse, the father of PR in Dos Passos's fictionalized America and one of many characters working in the field throughout *U.S.A.*, are vital threads that establish the importance of PR in *The 42nd Parallel*. And while his featured profiles expire with the first volume, Moorehouse has cameos in the profiles of Joe Williams and Dick Savage in *1919* and of Charley Anderson and Dick Savage in *The Big Money*—and these are but a few of the many characters who figure prominently in the PR industry.

In both cases, the punctual event of Armistice Day and the development of public relations, Dos Passos's strategy is a formal circumscription. His vision of *U.S.A.* is a composite of these fragmentary perspectives performed by the four narrative modes. But it is the cooperation, not the severance, of those fragments that is telling here. The four modes of narration in *U.S.A.* are not merely perspectivism, as in Wallace Stevens's famous "13 Ways of Seeing a Blackbird," nor are they interchangeable or divisible vantage points from which to view American history. Rather, they cooperate as a network to reflect the very networking of that history. For instead of a diaspora of fragments performing abject disconnection, the structure of *U.S.A.* is a nodal one: one's

reading of the Camera Eye in isolation imperils an understanding of Dos Passos's attempt at formal totalization. The formal logic of *U.S.A.* transforms the modernist aesthetic of fragmentation into a constellation of nodes, a network.

The buzzword that dominates the bulk of scholarship on *U.S.A.*'s form is montage, and it is no accident that scholars have traditionally recognized Dos Passos's debt to film. As is routinely observed, Dos Passos's Newsreels are reminiscent of the newsreels edited by Russian filmmaker Dziga Vertov in the *Kino-Pravda* series (1922-25), and in naming one of his narrative modes The Camera Eye, Dos Passos invokes Vertov's "kino-eye," an avant-garde philosophy of montage performed in *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929). David Kadlec observes that by the mid-thirties Dos Passos's debt to Vertov was an open secret and that Vertov was proud to be known for influencing Dos Passos (307). Kadlec notes that many critics establish Dos Passos's debt to Vertov in his 1928 tour of Moscow and Leningrad, when he attended some of Vertov's screenings, which he preferred to "the grander, state-backed productions of [Sergei] Eisenstien and Vsevolod Pudovkin" (307).

Montage remains a mainstay of *U.S.A.* criticism—so much so that many scholars seem to feel compelled to integrate it into their arguments or argue against it when addressing Dos Passos's formal invention. Celia Tichi, for example, grapples with that tradition when arguing for the form's function as a machine: "the filmic montage is a figure that does not go far enough to capture the full sense of Dos Passos's innovation [...] Though Dos Passos identified his fiction with film and cinema and called his own writing an intrinsically satisfying craft, his omniscient fictional form comes from the contemporary model of machine and structural technology" (216). Irr, writing about the

collisions that underlie *U.S.A.*'s performance of social speed, also obliges the issue of montage, observing the many literal collisions in the narrative—of cars, airplanes, and so on—before noting the logic of collision at the formal level: Dos Passos “constructs montages whose organizing principle is the collision between these equally inadequate modes of writing” (64). And in a more general way, montage is the figural metaphor used to reconcile the text’s tensions between fragmentation and totalization into a system of formal experimentation.

The aesthetics of montage are a foundational scholarly force to be reckoned with, as Tichi, Irr, and a host of other Dos Passos scholars can attest. Framing the trilogy in terms of montage provides a helpful visual analogy for the text and rightly asserts Dos Passos’s debt to film, but it does not fully engage the logic of *U.S.A.*'s form. Instead, what many readers understand as *U.S.A.*'s appropriation of montage techniques would be better viewed as a development of networked figuration. It is not that “network” is a substitution for “montage.” Rather, an emphasis on networked aesthetics illuminates the formal logic of montage, and provides a richer context for understanding Dos Passos’s formal experiments. In the montage experiments of modern film and even the photography and advertisements that experimented with the new technology of the half-tone press in the 1880s¹, old meanings are overturned and new meanings are produced by different techniques—sequential revolutions, overlays, split images, mirrored images, and so on. The productive capacity of montage, according to traditional scholarship on this practice, lies in the collisions it creates, in the violent contrast of juxtaposed images.

¹ See Christopher Phillips’s introduction to *Montage and Modern Life, 1919-1942* (1992) pages 22-28 for a more detailed account of the lineage and evolution of montage in the visual arts.

This is the force of montage for Irr, who reads the four narrative modes as operating on an organizational principle of collision.

A networked reading of montage, however, focuses not on the collisions, but on the collaborative moments the technique facilitates. Such collaboration is, after all, evoked in the Fordist metaphor of the “four-way conveyor system.” The four modes of narration are distinct, to be sure, but they produce meaning in their collaborative—not colliding or disjunctural—narration of history, as in the networked narration of Armistice Day and other developments and events that fall under the trilogy’s scope. Accordingly, Dos Passos’s narrative system performs Fordism, producing meaning not by violent juxtaposition but by the cooperation of separate functions that are simultaneously isolated and integrated, nodal and networked. Denning argues that Dos Passos’s “four-way conveyor system” is an “aesthetic Taylorism” that may be as much a symptom as it is a critique of rationalized labor (170). But if we view this narrative architecture in terms of production instead of management, then Fordist subsegmentation comes to the fore and we can understand how the four narrative modes cooperate.

U.S.A.’s narration has the multi-dimensional force of montage, but the logic of its productive capacity is fundamentally different from the theories and practices of montage that rely on collision. Disjunctural montage and networked montage both operate on a constellar model, but networked montage has the separate goal of totalization—a goal that is announced in the very title of Dos Passos’s trilogy. And this networked montage may be a uniquely American intervention. Christopher Phillips argues that, in contrast to the European and Russian experiments with montage, by the late 1930s in the United States, “montage was more and more recognized not as a

means to evoke the flux and discontinuity of the modern world, but as a way to represent a dominant social theme in late-Depression America: the idea of the ‘unity in diversity’ of all classes and ethnic groups” (35). Phillips responds to American trends in the visual arts, but Dos Passos’s interventions into montage follow the same path, emphasizing the networked interdependence of the separate narrative modes instead of their dispersal. Such an adoption of European and Russian montage into the contexts of American film, and into Dos Passos’s trilogy, demonstrates the uniquely American dialectic of modernist narrative, balancing the polarities of fragmentation and totalization with the mediating figure of the network.

A networked reading of *U.S.A.* demonstrates Dos Passos’s formal logic and allows us to recognize the points of interconnection between the trilogy’s four narrative modes. Moreover, it allows us to read in *U.S.A.* the playing out of the cultural logic of American modernism. It is no longer sufficient to observe that Dos Passos’s representational strategy of the “four-way conveyor system” fits neatly into one of the now-standard narratives for modernism—that the moderns’ revolt against verisimilitude was necessitated by rapid social changes that demanded radically new means of representation—or simply that it borrows montage techniques from avant-garde film. Instead, we must begin fitting *U.S.A.* into a narrative for the emergence of the network as the dominant figure of aesthetic experiments in high modernism.

U.S.A.: The United Six-Degrees Of America

Next to his radical formal innovation with the “four-way conveyor system,” the interconnectivity of Dos Passos’s content may seem tame—a cliché commonplace of contemporary film and television. Not only had characterological networking already been explored by others in the modern period, but Dos Passos himself had

experimented with it in *Manhattan Transfer*, his sprawling ode to New York City published in 1925. Ludington reminds us that in many ways, the fictional element of *U.S.A.*'s "reportages of the time" remained at the core of Dos Passos's vision: the trilogy would be "not a novel, but a series covering a lengthy period, 'in which characters appeared and reappeared'" (256). Indeed, if one node of the narrative structure weighed just a bit more than others for Dos Passos, it would be the character threads: "Despite incorporating nonfiction, his ultimate aim 'was always to produce fiction,' and he thought himself 'sort of on the edge between them, moving from one field to the other very rapidly.' The series of reportages was to be 'a contemporary commentary on history's changes, always as seen by some individual's ears, felt by some individual's nerves and tissues'" (Ludington 256). Again, Dos Passos aimed to transmit the historical content of the period through the networked body of characters.

The architectural networking of the form is matched in the networking of the content, with individual characters refracting the developments of Dos Passos's "reportages." In this respect, the fictional characters serve as secondary nodes under the primary nodal construction of *U.S.A.*'s form, providing a comfortable fictional body through which the historical and social developments resonate. In *The 42nd Parallel*, J. Ward Moorehouse is the figural manifestation of the developments in public relations, as we saw above, and several others like G.H. Barrow and Dick Savage carry that banner throughout the remainder of the trilogy. Joe Williams figures the tumultuous war years in 1919, and Ben Compton does the same for labor movements during that period. Charley Anderson and Margo Dowling figure the "roar" of the debt-fueled Roaring Twenties throughout *The Big Money*. And the other key character-threads

generally perform the same function, reinforcing the reportages' historical commentary with a handy synecdochal figuration of the major developments in American history. And so the individual characters act as another system of nodes that support the four-way conveyor system's networked narration of American history.

Within the fictional narrative mode, the individual characters are nodally connected to each other—not just to the broader networking schemes of *U.S.A.*'s formal approach to narration. Dos Passos's goal of a trilogy traversing a wide span of time "in which characters appeared and reappeared" means that *U.S.A.* takes a narrative structure that is increasingly common in contemporary narrative production: the six-degrees theorem. Under the totalizing network of vast schemes of American history performed by the "four-way conveyor system" lies this secondary network of crisscrossing characters.

But for many scholars these characters' relationships remain a jumble of disconnection. Michael Denning, for example, writes that the organizing principle of the fictional narration is disaggregation—a critique that was common among the trilogy's contemporary reviewers:

Perhaps the most striking thing and unsettling aspect of *U.S.A.* is the lack of any coherent connection between the characters: no family or set of families constitutes the world of the novel; no town, no neighborhood, or city serves as a knowable community; no industry of business, no university or film colony unites public and private lives; and no plot, murder, or inheritance links the separate destinies. (182)

And for that reason, Denning concludes that the fundamental social unit of *U.S.A.* is a cocktail party, a function that, he argues, marks the climax of each of the three volumes. The cocktail party, he writes, "stands as a substitute for narratives of home and family, an alternative to the domestic space that usually organizes the novel [...] In *U.S.A.*, the

party is not only a social structure and a symbolic space, it is a narrative kernel, one of the basic building blocks of the novel” (Denning 183). To whatever extent the characters interrelate, Denning argues, their fundamental disconnections override the ligatures that hold them together.

Denning’s attempt to read this disaggregation in the locus of the cocktail party is warranted, given the profile of literal cocktail parties in the culmination of each volume and in the aura of socialite Eveline Hutchins, and given the figurative cocktail party of “illassorted people”—to use one of Hutchins’s phrases—who have but little in common throughout the trilogy (Dos Passos, *Big Money* 444). And it is a reading to which I am sympathetic, as it serviceably addresses the lack of organic connections throughout the trilogy. But Denning’s reading does not go far enough in explaining the logic of the characters’ connections. To impose such a “substitute for narratives of home and family” to organize the fictional characters of *U.S.A.* is a false projection of a traditionally ordered narrative. Instead, making sense of that disaggregation on its own terms is precisely the demand placed on readers by Dos Passos’s trilogy.

If one is grasping for a handy figure to reconcile the characters who appear and reappear, who gather and diverge, whose connections to each other are so often mediated by third parties, one need look no further than the network. Let us consider the case of one of the trilogy’s most colorful characters, Doc Bingham. Never does Bingham enjoy the spotlight of a chapter titled after his name. Instead, we only see him through the character-threads “Mac” in *The 42nd Parallel* and “Richard Ellsworth Savage” in *The Big Money*. His appearance alongside Fenian “Mac” McCreary is brief, but memorable. Mac answers a want-ad listed for The Truthseeker Literary Distributing

Co., Inc. by Emmanuel R. Bingham, D.D. They travel the countryside, posing as purveyors of moral pamphlets but are quick to advertise other, less pious wares: Bingham stocks such scandalous tracts as *The Queen of the White Slaves* and tells one mark, “We have a number of very interesting books stating the facts of life frankly and freely, describing the deplorable licentiousness of life in the big cities, ranging from a dollar to five dollars. *The Complete Sexology of Dr. Burnside*, is six fifty” (Dos Passos, 42nd 36). The con is up, however, when Bingham is caught in bed with a patron’s wife and abandons Mac to fend for himself. He does not resurface until deep into *The Big Money*, when Dick Savage is assigned to handle a public relations account for Bingham, now going by “E.R. Bingham,” whose latest scam involves alternative medication and diets—regimes we might label “new age” today. Again, the con man’s appearance is fleeting. Bingham, the advocate of clean living, convinces Savage to escort him around some of the city’s seedy sex districts and eventually grants him the account. His only subsequent appearance in the text is indirect, as Savage and the Moorehouse PR firm lobby food legislation on his behalf and arrange favorable publicity on radio and newsreels—though not, I should clarify, the Newsreels of the complementary narrative mode.

In many ways, Bingham’s reemergence is completely frivolous—the kind of detail common in characterological networks that for some smacks of contrivance, and that for Denning smacks of disaggregation. Bingham’s tenuous links to primary figures like Mac and Dick Savage provide evidence for Denning’s concern over disaggregation, as he has no family or community ties to bind him to other characters. In fact, his wandering lifestyle may make Bingham one of the most fully disaggregated of all of *U.S.A.’s*

characters. And his social isolation is reinforced by his complete marginalization from the plots of the trilogy's fictional modes: Bingham is unnecessary to demonstrate Savage's loyalty to the Moorehouse firm and the degradation to which he falls, which one might assume are Dos Passos's primary goals in dragging Savage through strip clubs and Bingham's incessant claptrap. But if the frequency of such tangential crisscrossing is any indication, the network of relationships—Mac to Bingham to Savage to Moorehouse to Charley Anderson, and so on—is the important discovery that Dos Passos wants to reinforce with characters like Bingham. As I suggested earlier, that very networking is the basic unit of social organization within the fictional mode of narration, and its replacement of “narratives of home and family” that traditionally organize the novel makes for an important reconception of the nation—one that decentralizes the national space to rearticulate notions of community, rootedness, and belonging.

A major aspect of that networked conceptualization is the contingency that runs throughout the fictional narrative mode. The appearances and reappearances, the meetings and departures—these nodal connections tend to take place by chance. Besides Dick Savage's connection to Bingham, one might study the contingent crossings of G.H. Barrow with “Mac” McCreary, stenographer Janey Williams, Dick Savage, the wandering Anne Elizabeth “Daughter” Trent, labor advocate Mary French, activist Ben Compton, and aspiring actress Margo Dowling—an improbably wide and inclusive social circle to travel in. Or, to belabor the point with one particularly rich case with a more concrete locus, at the last of Eveline Hutchins's cocktail parties—indeed, the party that concludes *The Big Money*—Mary French briefly glimpses Margo Dowling.

French's profile thus far has centered on her social activism through Hull House and her advocacy for Sacco and Vanzetti, and Dowling has been something of a foil character, self-involved and materialistic in her fervent pursuit of stardom. The connection is a fleeting one: "Mary saw a small woman with blue eyelids and features regular as those of a porcelain doll under a mass of paleblond hair turn for a second to smile at somebody before she went out through the sliding doors" (Dos Passos, *Big Money* 442). Mary and Margo are not introduced, and have really no awareness of each other, but readers recognize Margo's description and register the flash of connection that sparks at the cocktail party.

The very lack of intimacy in this last connection gets to the heart of what many criticize as disorganization, disaggregation, or atomization in the fictional narrative mode. Without a shared community of place or work, without a common relation to an ongoing plot, and without so much as an introduction, it is hard to see any connection between Mary and Margo. In fact, the only thing they have in common is Eveline Hutchins, their mediating link. This dearth of intimacy gets to the issue of knowability, the lack of which Denning finds so troubling. It is true: whatever connections there are between these characters, there is rarely enough to constitute a knowable community. Even in the case of family, most characters carry a high degree of estrangement: Joe Williams, Dick Savage, "Daughter" Trent, Ben Compton, Charley Anderson, Margo Dowling, Mary French—nearly all of the major characters are deeply alienated from their families in some way or another. And in the absence of any knowable community to assemble these characters, one might not be completely mistaken to conclude that contingency is the organizing principle of the social in the fictional narration.

It is a mistake, however, to read the shortages of intimacy and knowability as constituting a narrative of dispersal. Instead, the fictional mode of *U.S.A.* insists on the interconnectivity of its networked characters, and while those relationships may lack profundity, the abundance of such connective chains demonstrates Dos Passos's totalizing impulse. As with the fragmented narration of *U.S.A.*'s form, the characters in the fictional mode of narration are best understood as polarities of a dialectical tension between dispersal and unity—a tension mediated by the networks that connect the characters and the polarities themselves.

Moreover, the fleeting encounter between Mary and Margo demonstrates the important work of characterological networks as a conceptual tool. Precisely because these characters are not linked by “narratives of home and family,” or by broader institutions such as class or ethnicity, their relations hold forth a flattening of the social sphere. In other words, absent of relational determinants, these characters mix freely and are able to invent new affiliations and new social formations. It is hard to imagine another context in which a lowly labor activist like Mary could inhabit the same space as a rising star like Margo. Thus Eveline's dedication to gathering together “ill assorted people”—bourgeois as it is in her practice—also carries the potential of creating new groups that her politics cannot control and that might well subvert hierarchies of class, race, work, and gender in ways that she might not imagine. None of this is to say that characterological networks of “ill assorted people” reliably produce new affiliations, as Denning's concerns about disaggregation indicate. But such networks of characters insist on the possibility of new social formations rising out of radically flattened social bodies.

Recognizing the stabilization of these diasporic figures into a network is key to understanding the connective logic that prevails in *U.S.A.* and that is the defining strategy of Dos Passos's magnum opus. To say that these characters do not realize their interconnection is not to say that they are, in fact, disconnected. The feelings of alienation are undeniable, especially regarding relations to their families, but it is also clear that Dos Passos strives to show their networked interrelations to the reader. This networked reading not only resolves misgivings one might have concerning the disaggregation of Dos Passos's fictional characters, but it also aligns the project of his fictional content with that of his formal experiment that organizes the trilogy's four modes of narration. Above all, a networked reading of *U.S.A.* enables us to perceive the interconnections that do take place in the absence of ligatures such as place or family. It would be unsound to label these relationships intimate or knowable, but it would be equally unjustified to claim that Dos Passos has nothing but "ill assorted people" populating his fictional scene. Instead, recognizing the networking of these characters enables readers of *U.S.A.* to grasp the social scale theorized by Dos Passos, one that holds out the potential for radically new means of social affiliation.

Networks Of History

The *U.S.A.* trilogy's double register of networks—at the formal level of the "four-way conveyor system," and at the level of content in the characterological networks of the fictional mode—provides one artifact of the moderns' attempt to grapple with the defining tension of the period, the dialectic of unity and dispersal, totality and fragment. Dos Passos's use of the network provides an alternative to those polarities that could rethink national space in response to dramatic changes initiated by the modern period's social, economic, and technological developments. Alongside similar projects to rethink

national space and the organization of national community via the figure of the network from intellectuals like Randolph Bourne, and alongside technological developments such as the radio that compelled Americans to rethink their interconnections to each other, Dos Passos's trilogy underscores the cultural logic of modernism and the importance of networked figuration to bridge its two polarities. And as a marker of intellectual history, *U.S.A.* makes a unique intervention into network thinking, inscribing the central dialectical tension of modernism onto the very work of historical analysis.

Aside from its radical formal innovation, *U.S.A.*'s intervention is derived from Dos Passos's use of the network as a conceptual tool not only to imagine new formations of the national space, but also to rethink the work of history. For Denning, the meat of Dos Passos's narrative architecture is history itself—a reasonable assertion given Dos Passos's conception of the trilogy as “a series of reportages of the time.” Denning argues that each mode of narration, each node of *U.S.A.*'s formal network, corresponds to a certain mode of history: the Newsreels are a sort of “public history,” the Camera Eye performs the work of “memory,” the biographical sketches offer a “grand narrative” of the period, and the character-threads narrate “a tale of capital” (170-72). This formulation works especially well for Denning's argument that *U.S.A.* narrates the decline and fall of the Lincoln republic, but it would be myopic to assume that this narrational strategy applies only to the content of *U.S.A.*'s study.

Denning's reading of *U.S.A.*'s narrative architecture obtains if one is reading the trilogy as a kind of historical documentary, but I want to argue that the ramifications of *U.S.A.*'s network narration is more complex. Looking at this complexity means teasing out the specific kinds of work performed by each of Dos Passos's “four-way conveyors.”

The Newsreels, as Irr has shown, turn more and more from news reporting to advertisements. The role of the Camera Eye is progressively diminished—there are twenty-seven in *The 42nd Parallel*, fifteen in *1919*, and only nine in *The Big Money*—showing a demotion of the importance of interiority throughout the trilogy. The character-threads follow a movement toward decay and corruption, with *The Big Money* marking a finale of failures: Charley Anderson dies of peritonitis, Margo Dowling cannot make the jump into talkies and is headed for obscurity, Dick Savage prepares to take over J. Ward Moorehouse’s PR firm in a sign of his own cultural bankruptcy, and Mary French is so disillusioned with her social work that she considers suicide. The biographical sketches chart a similar path, progressively focusing less on thinkers, inventors, and labor heroes, and more on monopolists and captains of industry.

The correspondence of the narrative modes’ trajectories toward a state of ruins demonstrates that they share a common project—what Denning would call the narration of the decline and fall of the Lincoln republic. But it takes another step to discern what exactly each narrative mode is doing to advance that project. The Newsreels ruminate on the problem of the apparatus of culture and its complicity in the rise of a new consumer society. The Camera Eye focuses on subjectivity, and illustrates its diminishment in an age of reification. The character-threads narrate the struggles of workers, though it would be hard to characterize all of them as working-class given the diversity of work performed by the various figures. And the biographical sketches act as figurations of the ruling class, as captains of industry ascend over inventors, thinkers, and artists to become the “great men” of the period. In each case, the narrative mode operates within the boundaries of one corner or another of the politics of capital. In

other words, *U.S.A.*'s networks are not only concerned with American history in the early twentieth century, but moreover with the very project of historical-materialist analysis.

Such an approach to the study of history is not without precedent among Dos Passos's contemporaries. Walter Benjamin, ever committed to the figuration of the constellation, explores the constellar nature of history in several of his later works. For example, in "Theses on the Philosophy of History," written shortly before his tragic suicide, Benjamin writes,

Historicism contents itself with establishing a causal connection between various moments in history. But no fact that is a cause is for that very reason historical. It became historical posthumously, as it were, through events that may be separated from it by thousands of years. A historian who takes this as his point of departure stops telling the sequence of events like the beads of a rosary. Instead, he grasps the constellation which his own era has formed with a definite earlier one. (263)

In other words, the study of history is not the ossification of a continuum of inevitable events, but a study of the breaks and disjunctures of history as well as the ligatures that give it shape. That understanding of historicism is also evident in *The Arcades Project*, the posthumously published exercise in what Benjamin described as "literary montage." Drawing on the networked constitution of montage, Benjamin calls for a constellar methodology of historicism to take root in the Marxist tradition:

The first stage in this undertaking will be to carry over the principle of montage into history. That is, to assemble large-scale constructions out of the smallest and most precisely cut components. Indeed, to discover in the analysis of the small individual moment, the crystal of the total event. And, therefore, to break with vulgar historical naturalism. To grasp the construction of history as such. (*Arcades* 461)

Again, Benjamin's program is to conceive of history not as a linear narrative of progress, but as a constellar assembly of various paths taken and abandoned across time. It is a

conception of history that is symptomatic of the dialectic of modernism in its refusal of a monolithic narrative of history, and in its reliance on networked figuration to mediate that falsely unified narrative linearity.

One might add that such a conceptualization of history carried a similar appeal for both Dos Passos and Benjamin. As a rejection of linear inevitability, this model of history turns the focus of study to alternate paths that might have been taken—a sort of counterfactual that would have appealed to Dos Passos in his lament for the Lincoln republic, or to Benjamin in his despair at the rise of Fascism in Europe. *U.S.A.* never indulges in outright counterfactual fantasy, as the ultimate state of ruination and failure of the Lincoln republic demonstrates. But Dos Passos's commitment to the heterogeneity of history gestures toward the different routes the U.S. could have taken: it is not only the story of Margo Dowling's empty self-interest as an entertainer, but also that of Mary French's commitment to solidarity in her advocacy for Sacco and Vanzetti and miners' strikes. Benjamin's constellar method of historicism means honoring these paths and others as equally viable elements of a networked system.

Moreover, it would be wrong to conclude that a networked model of historicism appeals only to history's "losers" taking refuge from historical narratives elevating "victors" whom they abhor. Instead, a networked model of historical analysis gets at the texture of history, and privileges the myriad nature of experience over the post-hoc nature of narrativization that tries to boil history down to a single, linear narrative thread. That commitment to the texture and multitudinousness of history drives *U.S.A.*'s work as a "series of reportages of the time." And the rejection of linear history proposed by Benjamin is reflected in the trilogy's rejection of narrative linearity in favor of a Fordist

model of subsegmentation—a model not only of narration, but of historicism, given Dos Passos's investment in representing the history of the early twentieth century. And it is precisely this result of *U.S.A.*'s networked aesthetics that marks Dos Passos's intervention into network thinking. A networked reading of *U.S.A.* illuminates not only the politics of the trilogy's use of networks to mediate the dialectical impulses to totalization and fragmentation, but also the politics that *U.S.A.* locates as intrinsic to the network itself. For the work of Dos Passos's network is precisely that of historical-materialist analysis.

U.S.A.'s generic contributions to the network narrative are noteworthy, as they balance the fragment and totality at both the level of form and content. But Dos Passos's use of the network as a conceptual tool to think the operations of history is equally telling. From this networked model of historicism, *U.S.A.* derives the depth of texture that gives the text its vividness and strength of insight in narrating the U.S.'s rocky entry into the twentieth century. But moreover that networked model inscribes onto historical analysis the central dialectical tension of American modernism, setting history as a field of play between the polarities of unity and dispersal.

CHAPTER 5
NATHANAEL WEST'S *THE DAY OF THE LOCUST*

It is fitting that for a figure so committed to the art of self-fashioning, the fiction of Nathanael West has so regularly been subjected to the currents of criticism across the various periods of the last century. After all, this is the Nathanael West who would change his name from Nathan Weinstein in order to evoke a genteel New Englander air and suppress the Jewish identity that caused him anxiety; who would forge a high school transcript for admission to Tufts; who would hijack the transcript of a Tufts classmate named Nathan Weinstein for admission to Brown.

And given these acts of authorial self-fashioning, it seems appropriate that the works themselves have been fashioned by critics to meet the needs of their own periods. When West died in 1940, a mere twenty-four hours after F. Scott Fitzgerald's death, the few obituaries that marked his passing reflected his neglect by the critics of the day. His age was routinely misreported, the titles of his works bungled, the name of his wife confused with his sister-in-law's. And while his obituaries were littered with erroneous details, they were also completely overshadowed by the coverage of Fitzgerald's death. Such was West's literary stature at the time of his passing. Beginning with the 1957 edition of his *Complete Works*, West was put to use in the service of late modernist antagonism toward popular culture. Rita Barnard argues that the heyday of West scholarship from the mid-fifties to the mid-seventies "depended in good measure on a particular interpretation of his work: one that casts his writing as a battle between art and the cheap clichés and disorder of mass culture, a battle from which art emerges victorious. The value of West's novels, in such readings, transcends and solves the problem of the vacuous and vicious culture represented in them" (10). A

resurgence of interest in West in the 1990s—keyed by scholarship by Barnard, Caren Irr, Robert Seguin and Jonathan Veitch, as well as by the 1997 Library of America collection of West's fiction and letters edited by Sacvan Bercovitch—places West in proximity to, if not quite in the mainstream of, the tradition of cultural radicalism in his criticisms of the massified consumer society.

What has remained constant throughout these fashionings of West is the recognition of his commitment to conceptualizing the crowd—a figure that I argue is a key component of American modernists' engagement with networked representational models. In West's case, the crowd is often entangled with the more abstracted figure of the masses, which in his renderings also takes on a networked constitution. West's sustained interest in the masses is not the mark of a Party-line proletarian novelist, as he was mostly ambivalent in his political commitments, but it does indicate a career-long interest in new forms of social organization that were emerging during the modern period. West's project has been read in terms of countervailing political investments according to the critical-political milieu of different periods, and within that ongoing discussion I want to call attention to the networked nature with which West represents the crowd and the masses. For never in West is either figure a monolithic, uniform fused group. Instead, West represents the crowd, and with an allegorical remove the masses as well, as a network of diverse interests and actors.

West's own stance on the subject of crowds is ambiguous and elusive, frustrating any readings that would have him either celebrate or abhor the social potential of crowds. And complicating that ambiguity is his fiction's messy conflation of crowd and masses that often associated the political subjectivity of the masses with the putatively

violent behavioral characteristics of the crowd—a trait that was symptomatic of the way many modernists tended to conceptualize the possibilities of spontaneous public aggregation and the related issues of mass culture. Thinking about West's crowds as a networked body helps readers bypass the typical politicized binary of crowds—that they are either a revolutionary force of progress or a revolting force of vulgarity. This is particularly useful in West's case, given that that tension may be fundamentally irresolvable in his fiction. In other words, thinking about these crowds as networks allows us to focus not on the crowd's content, but its form. Or, to put it still another way, an emphasis on networks enables us to think not about what a crowd *is*, but what it *does* as a representation of the social. As a networked social body, the crowd stages a crucial mediation of modernism's dialectic of homogeneity and atomization, providing a concise figure that negotiates the cultural logic of modernism.

Beyond being networked social bodies, West's crowds envision a mode of group formation modeled on connectivity, if not quite fully on collectivity. Accordingly, West's networked crowds and masses hold forth a truly democratic potential—though it is a democratization that for West is to be neither glorified nor regarded with horror. And in addition to West's deployment of the networked crowd as a figuration of potential social formations, his rendering of the masses suggests another critical stage in the moderns' development of network thinking that, due to the general diminishment of public space over the twentieth century, marks a form of networked theorization that is largely absent from the contemporary field of network thinking, further marking the unique modes of network aesthetics in modernism as well as the dialectical tensions of the period that conditioned them.

Le Bon's Temps, Or "The Era Of Crowds"

Published in May of 1939, *The Day of the Locust* received modest reviews. Among the reviews there was room for disagreement on the quality of West's prose, appraisals of the novel's surrealist traits, Hollywood polemics, and so on, but almost uniformly reviewers would note the text's apocalyptic finale, the crowd scene at a Hollywood premiere that remains most closely associated with West's artistic legacy. Precisely what that crowd scene meant, however, was up for debate. George Milburn, reviewing for the *Saturday Review of Literature*, noted the vividness of the final scene: "the book ends on a crescendo, narrating what happens in a mob gathered for a Hollywood premiere, a picture of an American Walpurgis Eve that must make anyone who reads it feel that he was there, too, and remember it as vividly" (68). A reviewer for *Time* lamented that the crowd scene simply caps off a "screwball grotesque" that demonstrates how West can "barely distinguish fantastic shadows from fantastic substance" (69). Writing for the *New Republic*, Edmund Wilson found resonance in West's characterization of the frustrated masses: "Such people [...] may in the mass be capable of anything. The daydreaming purveyed by Hollywood, the easy romances that always run true to form, only cheat and exacerbate their frustration" (73). Wilson's review hints at the allegorical reading of this scene that would become the standard: that the crowd figures the masses in their ugliest, most violent potentials.

The scene at the premiere, after all, complemented the uniquely modern sense that the crowd was becoming the central unit of social organization. Urbanization was more often talked about in terms of human density than in terms of infrastructure. Americans experienced the entertainments emerging at the turn of the century—amusement parks, baseball parks, and of course movie palaces—as inextricably public,

crowded spaces. And the milieu was conducive to spontaneous aggregations as well. In *The Great Crash, 1929*, John Kenneth Galbraith, the Keynesian economist and advisor to Kennedy, details the crowds gathering outside the New York Stock Exchange on Black Thursday—an appropriately apocalyptic setting to rival West’s. The crowd formed in part because of a failure in network technology: the stock tickers had fallen hours behind because of the volume of trading, creating uncertainty as to just how badly the market was crashing and taking investors’ hopes and dreams with it. Galbraith details the event:

Outside the Exchange in Broad Street a weird roar could be heard. A crowd gathered. Police Commissioner Grover Whalen became aware that something was happening and dispatched a special police detail to Wall Street to insure the peace. More people came and waited, though apparently no one new for what. A workman appeared atop one of the high buildings to accomplish some repairs, and the multitude assumed he was a would-be suicide and waited impatiently for him to jump. Crowds also formed around the branch offices of brokerage firms throughout the city and, indeed, throughout the country. Word of what was happening, or what was thought to be happening, was passed out by those who were within sight of the board or the Trans-Lux. (104-05)

The ominous “weird roar” and the fact that the observers seemed to have no idea what they were gathering for must have made for a great deal of concern on the ground. What were these people gathering to do? Was it information they were after? Or rubbernecking? Or was riot on their minds? I relate the story, however, not to underscore the simmering menace of such crowds, but to emphasize its spontaneity: crowds during the modernist period could come and go without any coordination whatsoever—a stark contrast to public gatherings today, and a tendency that, for many observers, gave the crowd a charge of dreadful unpredictability.

Further complicating the early readings of West’s apocalyptic crowd scene was the long shadow cast by Gustav Le Bon, the French sociologist and social psychologist

whose seminal text *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind* predicted in 1895 that the new century would usher in an “era of crowds.” One can argue, as Robert Nye does in *The Origins of Crowd Psychology* (1975), that Le Bon worked in the specifically French situation of responses both to alleged failings of the French Republic and to democratic political theory. But Le Bon’s work pervaded western thought about crowds during the modern period. In a way, confining Le Bon’s work to France would be like limiting Freud to the contexts of German sexuality and intellectual history—as if he had no broader influence. Le Bon’s proclamation of the crowded twentieth century was fairly commonplace—Mary Esteve reminds us of passing remarks from Friedrich Nietzsche, who in *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886) referred to “the century of the crowd,” and William James, whose preface to *The Principles of Psychology* (1890) characterized the turn of the century as “this crowded age” (2)—but Le Bon’s intervention left a wake that took many decades of work on crowd theorization to overturn. For Le Bon’s diagnosis of the crowded century focused not on emergent trends of urbanization or immigration, but instead advanced two foundational fallacies of the crowd, its makeup, and its relationship to society.

First, Le Bon posits the crowd as a completely monolithic, uniform body. His fundamental premise is that in a crowd each individual yields her consciousness to the fused consciousness of the crowd. He writes:

Under certain given circumstances, and only those circumstances an agglomeration of men presents new characteristics very different from those of the individuals composing it. The sentiments and ideas of all the persons in the gathering take one and the same direction, and their conscious personality vanishes. A collective mind is formed, doubtless transitory, but presenting very clearly defined characteristics. (Le Bon 23-24)

From that premise, Le Bon proceeds to explain how the crowd's "collective mind" demonstrates what today we would call "mob mentality"—a singular movement toward a shared goal that for Le Bon was often tinged with ideas of heredity akin to the tenets of scientific racism. What is important to observe here is not the results of the collective mind, but that it acts as a completely homogenous unit with no internal diversification.

Second, Le Bon pursues a pernicious conflation of crowds and the masses—a conflation that could later be extrapolated to the relationship between the crowd and the emergent mass culture. Le Bon's "clearly defined characteristics" of the crowd's collective mind almost always demonstrate a barbarism that is projected from the crowd's collective mindset onto the behavior of the masses. For example, in one passage Le Bon writes:

Crowds are only powerful for destruction. Their rule is always tantamount to a barbarian phase. A civilisation involves fixed rules, discipline, a passing from the instinctive to the rational state, forethought for the future, an elevated degree of culture—all of them conditions that crowds, left to themselves, have invariably shown themselves incapable of realising [....] When the structure of a civilisation is rotten, it is always the masses that bring about its downfall. (18)

The slippage from crowd to masses is a critical one in Le Bon's analysis. It is patently absurd that the masses, a term Le Bon uses in reference to the working classes and to ethnic minorities, would be equated to the behavioral characteristics of a crowd.

Nevertheless much of Le Bon's argument hinges on just this association. The terms are disentangled easily enough: a crowd is a locally *experienced* spontaneous social formation, whereas the masses are an abstractly *imagined* social body. But the legacy of their conflation in scholarship and in literature is so pervasive that maintaining the terms' autonomy in this paper may prove an insurmountable challenge—though a

challenge at the very least worth observing by way of marking Le Bon's widespread influence.

Neither of these fallacies were the sole markers of crowd thinking when *The Day of the Locust* arrived in 1939—another moment when attention was turned to thinking the crowd and the masses in the light of the spread of Fascism in Europe. Russ Castronovo, for example, argues against the universality of Le Bon's position on crowds among turn-of-the-century scholars. Castronovo shows that progressive sociologists recognized the democratizing potential of crowds as well as their destructive, irrational capacities, and he points to the pioneering American sociologist Robert Park, whose 1904 dissertation “invests collective frenzy and rational public opinion equally with the potential of social transformation” (94-96). Nevertheless, Le Bon's contributions to crowd theory certainly colored the reception of West's apocalyptic crowd scene. Surely Le Bon's work underlies George Milburn's invocation of an “American Walpurgis Eve” or Edmund Wilson's eerie warning that such a social formation may “be capable of anything.” But the climactic scene from *The Day of the Locust*—part of a common project notably advanced in *A Cool Million*, his 1934 novella—defies association with Le Bon's theories of the crowd's homogeneity and its direct equation with the masses. Instead, West's figuration of the crowd takes the shape of the network and imagines social formations that would flatten institutional barriers like class and ethnicity. Before we examine the apocalyptic crowd scene from West's final novel, I want to consider an earlier work to study the continuity of his networked representation of the crowd and his treatment of the slippage from crowd to masses. This survey will illustrate the

interventions into crowd theory that West makes, largely in contrast to Le Bon's positions.

Cool Crowds: Democratic Form, Fascist Content

West's interest in crowds and the masses appears throughout his works, demonstrating a sustained interest in new modes of social organization that were just appearing during the modern era. However, the novel *A Cool Million: The Dismantling of Samuel Pitkin* (1934) bears scrutiny for its strictly politicized crowds. Equally as volatile as the crowds of *The Day of the Locust*, the crowds of *A Cool Million* offer a note of counterpoint to the political ambiguity of West's more famous work, with a social aggregation that is clearly malevolent and unmistakably politicized in its parody of Fascism.

West's representation of the masses in *A Cool Million* indicates a great deal of anxiety over the ease with which the masses may be manipulated. And this is a concern that also bears a relationship to the crowd, the traditional figural rendering of Fascism's seduction of the masses. Published in 1934 to tepid reviews that failed to make sense of its break from the aesthetics of *Miss Lonelyhearts*, the first novella West published in 1933, *A Cool Million* is what Michael Denning pithily refers to as an "inverted Horatio Alger tale" (244). Indeed, as Douglas Shepard and Gary Sharnhorst have shown, West's homage to Alger borders on outright plagiarism, mimicking not only character and plot sequences, but also providing near-perfect matches of sentences and paragraphs.¹ In that respect, it certainly is a tale of the delusion of the masses by

¹ See Shepard's "Nathanael West Re-writes Horatio Alger, Jr.," *Satire Newsletter* 3, no. 1 (1965) and Sharnhorst's "From Rags to Patches, or *A Cool Million* as Alter-Alger," *Ball State University Forum* 21, no. 4 (1980). Also, for an argument against West's pastiche, see Aaron Talbot's "Fabricating the Fake

the impossible, mythical success narrative. On his quest to make millions, young Lemuel meets setback after setback, each leaving him further from material gain than before: he is ripped off by con men several times; a case of mistaken identity lands him in jail and further depletes his wealth; he is pressed into service as a homosexual sex slave, which results in his arrest, a shakedown by a public attorney, a plea deal, and his release to the streets, penniless. And those financial calamities reflect the bodily deformations he endures along the way—the removal of his teeth, the loss of an eye, the amputations of a thumb and a leg, and even a scalping. For every step Lemuel takes toward the American dream of wealth and leisure, he seems to take several more back to poverty and infirmity.

But while *A Cool Million* is a tale of the deception of the masses by the bootstraps mythos, it is also a tale of the American masses becoming duped into Fascism. While he sinks into the underworld of crime and extreme poverty, Lemuel becomes acquainted with a distinctly Fascist impulse circulating among the breadlines of the Depression. It is Nathan “Shagpoke” Whipple, the former president from Lemuel’s hometown whom Rita Barnard describes as “a Calvin Coolidge turned fascist” (149), who first sends Lemuel out into the world on the promise of American opportunity maxims. But Lemuel meets him again years later after Whipple has fallen on hard times, as he stands outside a Salvation Army canteen drumming up support for his new organization: “the National Revolutionary Party, popularly known as the ‘Leather Shirts’” (West, *Million* 172). Whipple espouses a populism that is an unmistakable parody of Fascism, and it is no accident that the bulk of the scenes addressing this

Shoddy: Nathanael West’s Parody of Horatio Alger, Jr.” from the dissertation, “Peculiar Information, Partic’lar Friends: How American Literature and Culture Know Horatio Alger, Jr.”.

parody center on two crowd gatherings—each of which demonstrates the manipulation of crowd and masses in the march toward Fascism.

The first notable manipulation of the crowd features Whipple's ability to influence a strictly delimited group of people. Working for a traveling freak show that doubles as a Communist propaganda organ, Whipple finds an opportunity to advance the Leather Shirts' campaign at a stop in the South. He exhorts a crowd of white males to rebel against the propagandizing leader of the traveling show, and is met with a disproportionately violent response as the crowd disperses, "shout[ing] 'Lynch him! Lynch him! Although a good three-quarters of its members did not know whom it was they were supposed to lynch" (West, *Million* 228). From here, the crowd's violence spreads in a grisly comedy of errors: "Another section of Shagpoke's audience, made up mostly of older men, had somehow gotten the impression that the South had again seceded from the Union [...] They ran up the Confederate flag on the courthouse pole, and prepared to die in its defense" (West, *Million* 229). The crowd's violence becomes a full-blown riot, resulting in the parading of African-Americans' heads on poles, the nailing of a Jew to a door, and the raping of a Catholic priest's housekeeper. The passage clearly parodies the Southern stereotypes of racism, anti-Semitism, and anti-Catholicism, and it also demonstrates the easy manipulability of a crowd. And the ease with which the crowd fragments into these sects suggests that these sects were already a part of the crowd—that it is not a breakdown of a coherent unit that is at work, but the revelation of the factions that were already inside it.

But Whipple would not be deterred by this failed attempt to realize his Fascist vision. The novel concludes with a second crowd scene that features Whipple's ability

to lead the entire U.S. to Fascism, figuring the crowd of the novel's final sequence for the masses of the nation. After Lemuel is made an involuntary martyr for the Leather Shirts' cause, West gives us something of an afterword in the narration of the "Pitkin's Birthday" celebration, a prolepsis that marks the ascendancy of Whipple's new political regime. Whipple presides over a parade commemorating Lemuel as propaganda for the National Revolutionary Party. The streets of New York are overcrowded with youths in Party costume: "It is Pitkin's Birthday, a national holiday, and the youth of America is parading down Fifth Avenue in his honor. They are a hundred thousand strong. On every boy's head is a coonskin hat complete with jaunty tail, and on every shoulder rests a squirrel rifle" (West, *Million* 237). When the parade reaches the reviewing stand, Whipple addresses the youths, casting Lemuel as an icon of the Party's xenophobic tenets. The crowd in observance of Pitkin's Birthday is overpowered by Whipple's distortions of Lemuel's life, as the novel concludes with their dissonant exclamations: "'Hail the Martyrdom of the Bijou Theatre!,' 'Hail, Lemuel Pitkin!,' and 'All hail the American boy!'" (West, *Million* 238). The dissonance, like the dispersal of the crowd of Southern whites, demonstrates heterogeneity within the crowd. But that comes as little solace, as the mass-deception of the crowd signals the manipulation of the entire nation toward the embrace of Fascism.

In both the Southerners' lynch mob and the Pitkin's Birthday event, the crowds' manipulability resonates with Le Bon's thesis that spontaneous formations are controlled by a mechanism akin to hypnosis. The crowd operates, he writes,

in a special state, which much resembles the state of fascination in which the hypnotized individual finds himself in the hands of the hypnotiser [...]. The conscious personality has entirely vanished; will and discernment are lost. All feeling and thoughts are bent in the direction by the hypnotiser.

Such is also approximately the state of the individual forming part of a psychological crowd. He is no longer conscious of his acts. (Le Bon 31)

Whipple's role as skillful manipulator of crowds smacks of the hypnotist, but it is an over-reading to say that Whipple's crowds are uniform in their state of agitation. Instead, West provides clear evidence that these crowds, even while they are manipulated as a discrete group, demonstrate internal variability. After Whipple's inflammatory speech to the southern whites, the crowd separates into three factions—the first heads to the opera house that staged the freak show, the second heads to defend the Confederate flag on the courthouse flagpole, and the third proceeds to the town's principal stores and to free their relatives from jail—each of which is itself an internally homogeneous crowd. The diversification of that crowd, alongside the very dissonance of the crowd's cries at the Pitkin's Birthday parade, demonstrates that even while a spontaneous body can be manipulated as a single organism—toward violence, toward Fascism, and so on—it still retains a distinctly networked character. That these crowds maintain internal diversification may seem like a commonplace, but it is important to recognize how West's crowds preserve that networked organization precisely against Le Bon's pervasive theories that treated the crowd as a homogeneous unit.

More importantly, the networked diversification of these crowds also challenges the assumption that West's crowds are simply Fascist. Emphasizing the networked elements of these crowds—instead of simply reading them as monolithic units doing Whipple's bidding—allows us to see how the networked constitution of crowds actually undermines their manipulability. In the case of the Southerners, the fact crowd's demonstration of its own factionalism is at cross-purposes with West's portrayal of the

crowd as the puppet to Whipple's puppeteer. And the very dissonance of the crowd at the parade signals that the crowd can never be shoehorned into perfect orthodoxy, leaving room—or at least hope—for an alternative to Whipple's ideological regime. For while it is easy enough for Whipple to stir up the animosities of these crowds, it is another thing entirely for him to direct them into concerted action. Their interests are too diverse to be controlled. Perversely, these diverse interests groups—which political, ethnic, or religious group shall the Southerners persecute? and how best to celebrate the hero Pitkin? —signal a democratic form to these crowds that appear Fascist in content.

Given their relationship to Whipple, the explicitly politicized crowds in *A Cool Million* offer counterpoint to those of *The Day of the Locust*, which, notwithstanding their absence of politicians or political rallies, are often understood as expressing concerns about Fascism. Crowds were, after all, commonly associated with the rise of Fascism in the minds of West's contemporaries. And while *A Cool Million* purportedly advances that association by coupling its crowds with Whipple's politics, a close reading of the crowds indicates that they actually resist full conformity to Whipple's agenda. Recognizing the tensions of those politics—that the crowds' contents remain an expression of Fascist sentiment while their form persists as a decentralized, diversified democratic body—allows us to bypass the traditional readings of Fascism's grip on crowds and on the masses with a reading that foregrounds the democratic possibilities of these networked bodies. This reading of the crowds in *A Cool Million* allows us to see, even in the most politicized of crowds, the formal renderings of the social that are also at work in *The Day of the Locust*.

Movies And Masses In *The Day Of The Locust*

Unlike Whipple's crowds in *A Cool Million*, the famous scene in *The Day of the Locust* has no explicit political motivation, and it carries a deep ambivalence on matters of class. These characteristics extend to other crowded scenes of the text. What these crowd scenes have in common, and what distinguishes them from West's earlier figurations of crowds and the masses, is their deployment of the Hollywood novel genre. By the time *The Day of the Locust* was published, most of the conventions of the genre were well established—tropes of the promised land of glitzy opportunities, the fallen woman who fails at acting and turns to prostitution, and so on. As John Parris Springer observes, "fiction about movie making first appeared in the early teens as juvenile literature" (8), and by the 1930s it was an easily recognizable genre, with *The Day of the Locust* having been preceded by James M. Cain's *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1934), Horace McCoy's *They Shoot Horses, Don't They?* (1935), Richard Hallas's *You Play the Black and the Red Comes Up* (1938), and John O'Hara's *Hope of Heaven* (1938). For West, the Hollywood novel was a logical focus given his longstanding interests in surrealism and in thematics we would today liken to those of postmodern simulation. His unique intervention into the Hollywood novel genre is to use it as a window onto the entangled figures of the crowd and the masses, and the culture-industry thematics that accompany the genre allow him another opportunity to think through the form and content of crowds.

That West's Hollywood novel would invest itself so thoroughly in the representation of crowds should come as no surprise, because movie theaters were one of the primary sites of crowd theorization—and especially anxiety over the power of the crowd—during the early 1900s. With the advent of the first moving-picture projector

in 1896, the nickelodeon theater emerged as a space typified by rowdiness and crowdedness that was inseparable from its working-class, immigrant patronage. Accordingly, the nickelodeon was a major locus of intellectual output, not only over the products of popular culture consumed there, but also for the articulations of the crowds drawn there—their democratizing potential, their potential for societal corruption, and so on. The nickelodeon was so deeply associated with the crowd, Russ Castronovo writes, that in 1915, “the film industry began encouraging patrons to speak not of ‘movies’ but of the more respectable-sounding ‘photoplays’ in an effort to help cinema shed its dodgy background of immigrant and working-class contexts” (138). Castronovo explains the milieu that set the demands for the shift from the nickelodeon to the more respectable, middle-class “movie palace”:

In comparison to the limited range of people who could purchase pricey theater tickets, a 1910 survey of film audiences in New York City concluded that 72 percent of all moviegoers came from working-class backgrounds. Despite this breakdown, early movie audiences could not be standardized, as they are today, into the singular identity of an absorbed spectator but instead remained something much more uncertain and much less calculable: the crowd. Not only did films feature scenes of ‘crowd splendor’ and not only might crowds be dubbed a ‘moving picture of democracy’ [...] Movies were not simply for or about crowds; this new art form might be productive of them. (142)

That the film industry produces crowds was easily recognized in the era of the nickelodeon, and this became one aspect of the narration of the crowd in *The Day of the Locust*.

West places the crowds of *The Day of the Locust* in his own present, well after the decline of the nickelodeon era, though the residual association between film and the immigrant crowd remained. But by this time, with the transition to the “movie palace,” film had become a much more widely consumed commodity. Michael Denning

estimates that “by 1937, movies accounted for three-quarters of America’s dollars spent on leisure” (41). Rita Barnard adds that during this period Works Progress Administration unemployment funds, in guidelines for both the household “emergency budget” and the “maintenance budget,” had “specifically allotted funds to enable each family member to attend the movies: once a month on the former, and once a week on the latter,” fueling the rise of the film industry as well as the American ideology of consumption (25). So at the publication of *The Day of the Locust*, the movie theater occupied a dual space regarding the crowd and the masses. On the one hand, it still bore the residual association with the nickelodeon’s urban, immigrant crowd. On the other hand, the movie theater had become the locus of a truly mass consumer society, severed from its putatively metropolitan locale and its class-specific makeup to begin to saturate the entire nation.

From this dual position, simultaneously linked to the crowd of the nickelodeon era and the masses of the contemporary film industry, *The Day of the Locust* recognizes the entanglement of these two figures and their mediation by the industries of mass culture. And that dual dynamic begins well before the apocalyptic crowd scene that concludes the novel. The introductory passage, wherein Tod Hackett observes the studio backlot scene of extras marching toward their set, pales in comparison to the climactic finale, but it is important to see how it establishes some of the intersections of the crowd, the masses, and the mass media, effectively framing *The Day of the Locust* between bookends of crowd scenes. Hackett looks out over his set and costume design materials to see an army passing below his window. It is the usual backlot conceit: to fool the reader that an event is actually happening only to reveal that event was merely

the stuff of a Hollywood stage or backlot. The telling detail, however, lies in how West's narrator describes the cast and crew as they pass by: "An army of cavalry and foot was passing. It moved like a mob; its lines broken, as though fleeing some terrible defeat" (West, *Locust* 21). The army parade's descent into an unregimented mob not only indicates the falsehood of the Hollywood representation of military regimentation—as if reflecting the very massification of film itself. It also suggests the very audience of such a cultural commodity, which is simultaneously commodified as a product of the film industry and is reified as a figure of the masses. In other words, the simile likening the army of cast and crew to a mob has the effect of evoking the specter of the nickelodeon's bygone raucous crowds.

And such a nickelodeon audience is replicated in the crowd that gathers to watch a stag film at Ms. Jennings's upscale call house. Migrating over from the fashionable party at Claude Estee's house, Tod and the industry insiders sit down for a screening of *Le Predicament de Marie, ou La Bonne Distraite*—a piece about an oversexed family and their maid that sets up a correspondingly oversexed scene in the theater, building up sexual tension in the film and within the audience until the film reel breaks down and ruins any hopes of a climactic payoff for the family or Tod's crew of spectators. Even as the projectionist is preparing to start the film, the crowd of moviegoers is boisterous: "Mrs. Schwartzen started to whistle and stamp her feet and the others joined in. They imitated a rowdy audience in the days of the nickelodeon" (West, *Locust* 44). But the rowdiness is more than a performance or another signal of the affect of the Estee cohort. Rather, it muddles the classed nature of crowds across the text. As Robert Sequin writes in *Around Quitting Time*,

one hint that West intended this as a fairly crucial moment comes when the film projector breaks, and someone in the crowd yells ‘Cheat!’ This reminds us once more of *The Cheated*, the original title of the book, and establishes the fact that we are at some level not to understand these high-living Hollywood socialites as distinct from the scrambling lumpens who populate the rest of the novel, that some deeper fictional identity unites them. (104)

The result is that West effectively extends the qualities of the nickelodeon audience to the uppercrust of Hollywood.

It is no coincidence that this ambivalence over the politics of class would involve one of the text’s working titles. The slate of titles West tinkered with as he was editing the manuscript for publication reflects a wavering uncertainty of his sociological project—to cast the crowds and the masses as heroes of class warfare, or as victims of class antagonism, or as the vulgar byproducts of reckless culture industries. The version that Random House first accepted was entitled *The Cheated*, but in intervening drafts West also considered *The Grass Eaters*, *Cry Wolf*, and *The Wrath to Come* as viable contenders for the title. Biographer Jay Martin reads *The Grass Eaters* as “a reference to the cultists who infest the novel and make up the Torchbearers” of “The Burning of Los Angeles” (313). *Cry Wolf* underscores the doltishness and manipulability of the masses who populate West’s riotous crowd scene, and *The Wrath to Come* clearly emphasizes the prophetic apocalypticism of the violence that the crowd scene engenders, as if foretelling outright revolution. In each case, the working titles and even the final title bear a distinctly charged element of mass psychosis in intimating the novel’s dominant thematics, and the vacillation between the politics of these titles reflects the ambiguities in the politics of the crowds that remained in the text after the title was decided.

The Cheated, the only working title to be drawn from the text, stands alone in demonstrating the conflation of the crowd and the masses and their relation to the apparatus of mass culture. It is, as Seguin notes, shouted by a moviegoer at Ms. Jennings's brother in frustration of the thwarted cinematic-sexual climax. And in the climactic scene outside of Kahn's Persian Palace Theatre, the narrator reflects on the crowd before it is sparked to violence: "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" (West, *Locust* 193). The preceding lines acknowledge that what unites the crowd of "the cheated" is precisely their common betrayal: "They realize that they've been tricked and burn with resentment. Every day of their lives they read the newspapers and went to the movies. Both fed them on lynchings, murder, sex crimes, explosions, wrecks, love nests, fires, miracles, revolutions, wars. This daily diet made sophisticates of them" (West, *Locust* 192). The chain of signification is typical of crowd representation, with the crowd here figuring the masses—both of which, in this case, are mediated by hazardous properties of the mass media.² Tod earlier describes these people as those who "had come to California to die" (West, *Locust* 23). The crowd at Ms. Jennings's is traditionally denied an allegorical reading, but the riotous crowd at Kahn's is generalized to the abstract masses, with both figures internally mediated by the linkages of the mass culture industries.

Precisely who these "cheated" people are further complicates the ambiguities of this apocalyptic crowd. The assembly that forms outside of Kahn's to watch celebrities

² West had experimented with the language of mass media betrayal in *Miss Lonelyhearts*, wherein the protagonist, himself an advice columnist for a major newspaper, sees a crowd forming along a street in the Bronx and thinks to himself that dreams "have been made puerile by the movies, radio and newspapers" (39).

gather for a movie premier is progressively described as a “crowd,” a “mob,” and finally a “riot,” characterizing the group’s turn to violence. But again West muddies the class makeup of the crowd, perhaps reflecting his general ambivalence on the classed nature of these social formations. Sequin corrects the traditional readings that West’s crowd is strictly a working class or lower-middle class phenomenon: “Tod perceives the crowd to be essentially ‘lower middle class’ in composition, a perception complicated a few lines later by the narrator’s observations on the daily routines of the crowd” (111). West writes, “All their lives they had slaved at some kind of dull, heavy labor, behind desks and counters, in the fields and at tedious machines of all sorts” (*Locust* 192). Sequin, studying the makeup of the crowd, argues that, “this diversifies considerably our sense of the class composition of the crowd” (111). It seems as if West is trying to have it both ways, labeling the crowd “lower middle class”—not coincidentally the class most often associated with German Fascism—in one moment, and describing it as composed of a range of white- and blue-collar workers the next. By eschewing traditional class striations with this nebulous, flattened aggregation, West again deploys a social body that is democratic in form.

That muddiness of the classed element of the crowd is perhaps further illuminated by a contrast of the language West considered for earlier drafts of the apocalyptic finale. Jay Martin recovers this passage from the drafting of the novel’s final pages: “In West’s penultimate version of *The Day of the Locust* he wrote that ‘the [middle-class] Angelenos would be first, but their brothers all over the country would follow. Only the working classes would resist. There would be civil war’” (319). West ultimately withdrew the direct language of class antagonism, but such antagonism still underlies

the distinctly classed nature of the crowd, as the narrator describes the constituency of the crowd that Seguin locates: “Tod could see very few people who looked tough, nor could he see any working men. The crowd was made up of the lower middle class, every other person one of his torchbearers” (West, *Locust* 191).

Diminished in its revolutionary tone, the more ambiguous classing of this crowd that remains in the published version demonstrates some of the slippage from crowd to masses that typifies turn-of-the-century sociological theory as well as some of West’s earlier work. But it is important to recognize that West does not stage the masses as having an inherent inclination toward violence, as Le Bon argued. Instead, the crowd outside Kahn’s is an inert social body that remains placid until violence calls it into violence. The bias against the crowd is evident at the earliest moment Tod sees it. The narrator describes his observation of the policemen trying to keep the roads open for traffic: “He noticed how worried they looked and how careful they tried to be. If they had to arrest someone, they joked good-naturedly with the culprit, making light of it until they got him around the corner, then they whaled him with their clubs” (West, *Locust* 190). Tod himself registers a portentous feeling about the crowd, thinking, “At the sight of their heroes and heroines, the crowd would turn demoniac. Some little gesture, either too pleasing or too offensive, would start it moving and then nothing but machine guns would stop it. Individually the purpose of its members might simply be to get a souvenir, but collectively it would grab and rend” (West, *Locust* 190). While intense anxiety surrounds the formation of the crowd, the crowd itself is placid. It causes the police some logistical problems, periodically bulging out into the streets, and it is loud with the “continuous roar of catcalls, laughter and yells, pierced occasionally by a

scream” (West, *Locust* 190). Never, however, does the crowd demonstrate a potential for anything more than unruliness. The anxiety demonstrated by the police, Tod, and a reporter covering the premier is wholly out of step with the reality of the crowd’s mundane nature, and they only receive post-hoc justification after the crowd is set into tumult by Homer Simpson’s beating of Adore Loomis. That this is the event setting the crowd into motion is telling: while the crowd does not act collectively to redress Simpson’s brutal attack, and even devolves into its own state of depravity in its numerous sexual assaults, it is only induced to violence by an act of violence. The crowd is rendered as a mirror or as a vessel, only reflecting the qualities cast onto it or into it, and the result is a refusal to present the crowd as inherently malevolent.

Of course the most viscerally striking aspect of this crowd is its penchant for violence—so much so, I think, that it threatens to overshadow some of the democratic politics it carries in its formal composition. For even as the crowd at the movie premier turns toward violent expressions of frustrated desires, its formal organization remains as a network of diverse interests. In advance of the celebrities’ arrival, thousands have already gathered outside Kahn’s, steadily assimilating the new arrivals into the crowd that the narrator describes as having, if not exactly agency, then a distinct sense of subjectivity: “It allowed itself to be hustled and shoved out of habit and because it lacked an objective. It tolerated the police, just as a bull elephant does when he allows a small boy to drive him with a light stick” (West, *Locust* 191). Later, caught in the melee of the crowd, Tod experiences it as body of water: “He was jostled about in a hacking cross surf of shoulders and backs [...] Using the eucalyptus tree as a landmark, he tried to work toward it by slipping sideways against the tide, pushing hard

when carried away from it and riding the current when it moved toward his objective” (West, *Locust* 196-97). The crowd, Tod begins to realize, resembles the angry “torchbearers” who menacingly pursue Faye Greener in “The Burning of Los Angeles,” the painting that Tod has been planning throughout the text. On the surface of both of these passages, the crowd appears to be monolithic in its apocalyptic drive, bearing a strong likeness to Le Bon’s uniform, conscience-sharing collective.

But a closer look reveals the crowd’s internal diversification, the networked properties that hold it together. Inside the lurching mass of people, Tod begins to recognize different divisions within the crowd. One segment spasms with the jostling of bodies, with men grabbing after the torn dress of a young girl. Another segment is so placid that “most of the people seemed to be enjoying themselves” while they analyze the antics of their more animated counterparts and discuss how the riot was initiated in the first place (West, *Locust* 198). And even below that level of the crowd’s segmentation, Tod encounters the individuals of the crowd in some profile, bringing into relief the nodal constitution of the crowd. Homer Simpson, the dull Midwesterner who comes to California to bask in the sun, weaves through the crowd, and Tod sees Homer’s “head bobbing above the crowd” before Homer beats the child actor Adore Loomis, the event that sets the crowd into tumult (West, *Locust* 193). In the violent segment of the crowd, Tod can see the anonymous young girl whom he chivalrously protects from an old man’s sexual assault, only to find a second man grabbing at her body and torn dress. In the docile segment of the crowd, he is able to eavesdrop on the conversation between a “stout woman,” her male companion, a woman at her side, “a little man wearing a cloth cap,” and a third woman (West, *Locust* 199). These

segmentations of the crowd—into separate modes of being in the crowd and into individuals—reinforce the networked constituency of West’s crowd, supplanting its monolithic façade with an interior structure akin to a constellation.

Again, the difference between the crowd’s content and its form is informative of our readings of West’s representations of class and social organization. To read these unruly crowds simply in terms of their unruliness privileges traditional essentialisms about crowds and the lower-class masses that date back to Le Bon’s work. But to emphasize the networked form of these bodies highlights a completely different politics of the crowd—one that is democratic in its flattening of social strata and its diversity of interests. In the case of the crowds in *A Cool Million*, that network form undercuts the Fascist agenda of Whipple’s politics. And in *The Day of the Locust*, that networked form offers a utopian angle to crowd formations, positioning them not as instruments of violence, but as organizations defying a central control—and especially decoupling crowds and masses from their stereotypical association with working and lower-middle classes. By focusing on the formal composition of West’s crowds, I do not intend to de-politicize them, as formalist studies so often tend to do. Instead, a study of the networked form of these crowds *re-politicizes* them by demonstrating the democratic nature of their organization precisely against the typical associations between crowds and violence that tend to treat the working and lower-middle classes with distrust or worse.

None of this, however, resolves the binaries that tend to dominate the discussion of West’s crowds—whether they are revolutionary or revolting, or whether they are the domain of the working and lower classes or that of the entire class hierarchy. Instead,

this emphasis on the crowds' formal networking schemes allows us to see how West envisions a social organization founded on principles of connectivity—not to be confused with the solidarity of collectivity. To consider these crowds as networked figurations means that we should also pay attention to the nature of their mediating links. In West's early fiction and especially in *The Day of the Locust*, those mediating links, the ligatures of the networks that constitute his crowds and masses, are the connective forces of mass culture industries. These are the links that bind the crowd at Ms. Jennings's stag film, outside of the movie premier at Kahn's, and, to a lesser degree, to the audiences gathered by Whipple's political machine. In other words, the formal organization of the network is the means by which West addresses the substance of the network—the mass media that comprise it. And it is this relationship—between the industries of mass culture and the democratizing potential of networked crowds—that bears the load of West's utopian critique.

Networking Democracy

West's fixation on the potential import of a crowd's social organization is a telling one, because it speaks to a social space that may have expired with the passing of the historical conditions of modernism. Susan Hegeman's essay "Haunted by Mass Culture" (2000) argues that the period of modernism was uniquely situated to express the experience of mass culture and the public, both of which have precipitously declined since (and because of) the Cold War years. She surveys the 1934 sinking of the *Morro Castle* off the coast of Asbury Park, New Jersey, which brought about a gathering of as many as a quarter million people that was facilitated by sensationalizing media coverage, beachside vendors supplying souvenirs of the event, and reduced railway fares meant to spark New Jersey tourism—a scene she characterizes as "both a

spontaneous public festival and a media event” (Hegeman 298). It was a scene reminiscent of the crowds gathering spontaneously before the Stock Exchange on Black Thursday, though of a completely different scale and duration. Hegeman’s conclusions drawn from the anecdote of the *Morro Castle* crowd are twofold. First, it demonstrates precisely what so many of the modern culture critics feared: “the portent of the end of civil society” (Hegeman 299). Hegeman reads the beachside scene as confirming the fears that the masses were “a potential army of zombies” given the gathering’s passive manipulability by the press, the souvenir vendors’ catering to truly lurid and base tastes, and the New Jersey tourist industry’s likeness to “insidious political forces of charismatic populism and totalitarianism” (299). Second, the spectacle of the *Morro Castle* demonstrates the remove we feel today, after the late modernist turn of the Cold War era, from the possibilities of that kind of spontaneous formation in the first place—given the atomizing forces of suburbanization, home entertainment technologies, and the increasing privatization of public spaces. Fundamentally, Hegeman writes, the scene at the sinking of the *Morro Castle* was “the product of a different arrangement of social space than the one we now experience” (300)—and not because the press covered it in scandalous detail, but because people flocked to it in such great numbers. “Though it is true that spontaneous public gatherings still appear at the sites of sensational murders or other gruesome events,” she argues, “they seldom develop the carnivalesque air the *Morro Castle* provoked, precisely because we are now less familiar with the forms and norms of public entertainment in general” (Hegeman 300).

Precisely the cause of the decline of this “different arrangement of social space” is a powerful question for scholars of modernisms. Hegeman points to a shift “from urban

public culture to a far more privatized one,” noting, among other causes, the turn away from public popular entertainments like amusement parks, dance halls, and the raucous movie theaters of the nickelodeon era (300). Nicolaus Mills offers a potential explanation in declining rates of unemployment, pointing to the start of World War II when “the economic conditions that made the working-class crowd such a prominent feature of American life in the 1930s disappeared. In the eighteen months between June, 1940, and December, 1941, the number of unemployed people dropped from 8.5 to less than 4 million” (112). Whatever the manifold causes, the decline in such public aggregation marks a momentous, if generally under-appreciated, development in twentieth-century American history.

My primary goal in invoking Hegeman’s argument about the crowd’s “different arrangement of social space” is not to wax nostalgic about lost potentials of the 1930s, but to highlight the very specific historical context in which West invests his project in the representation of the crowd and mass media, and to consider Hegeman’s description of modernist social space as itself reflective of the cultural logic of modernism, as it situates modernist space as itself mediating the dialectical tension of centralization and dispersal. For if West is relying on a networked figure of the crowd, as has been the contention of this paper, and if conditions fostering the public nature of the crowd were soon to disappear, as Hegeman suggests, then West’s networked crowds give us a unique position to explore a mode of network theorization that responds to an inextricably modernist situation, and in fact underscores the uniqueness of the modernist situation. In other words, the historical delimitations of the so-called “era of crowds” punctuates the trajectory of network theorization by isolating this

particular form of network representation to the modern period, whereas other forms, like the characterological mode of six-degrees narration, persist into the present. Or, to put it still another way, it is as if we are looking at an ideational fossil record and seeing an early variant of network thinking that simply did not adapt to survive into contemporary network discourses.³ Mass media has certainly penetrated American social organization to an even greater degree today, so why is its manifestation during the modern period so often accompanied by crowds?

At the heart of this historically distinct figuration of the network is an equally unique vision of democracy. And that should come as no surprise, because democracy was one of the major stakes of the crowd in Le Bon's writing. Part of his pernicious conflation of crowd behavior and the unruliness of the masses stems from his worry over the forces of democratization that risked, in his mind, "the destruction of those religious, political, and social beliefs in which all the elements of our civilization are rooted" (Le Bon 14). Russ Castronovo adds that sociologists of Le Bon's era would express the common sensibility of the crowd as "the democratic mind"—even if they sometimes allowed that formulation the stain of a demonized irrationality (94). Even today democracy is the central terrain of contemporary scholarship on the modern crowd. Mary Esteve's *The Aesthetics and Politics of the Crowd in American Literature* (2003), for example, advances the thesis that

because of the way urban crowds readily embodied a modern polity's democratic populace without, however, harboring any specific political contention, they, as discursive figures, made visible the idea of a

³ This is not to discount the work of many contemporary theorists—for example, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's work in *Multitude* (2004) and *Commonwealth* (2009), both of which articulate a need for an unrealized, truly lateral society of public or common access in response to the striations of globalization. But these remain calls for a certain kind of social organization, not reflections of an actually lived public experience like the one Hegeman positions as passing with the moderns.

categorically separate sphere, wherein this politically defined populace could be seen as engaged in distinctly non-political, but nevertheless deeply attractive and arguably humanly essential, activity. (3)

And Castronovo's aptly titled *Beautiful Democracy* (2007) studies how discourses of the crowd and the masses fit into a national debate over "civic stability," fueled by debates over the aesthetics of mass culture and those of upper-class refinement (5, 17). From the declined era of the public to today's treatment of the period, the crowd has been inextricably linked to the hopes and anxieties of democracy.

What does it mean to have a networked figuration of democracy in this period that saw the rise and fall of the crowd? In the modern era, "democracy" still connoted, at least in part, an equality of condition. That kind of social organization is suggested in the networked figuration of a crowd that we have seen across West's fiction, which acts as figure of a truly flattened social organization. West's crowd in *The Day of the Locust* is rigidly classed, it is true, but as an independent figure the crowd gestures toward a society where each individual bears equal relation to the networked whole—a formulation borne out in the de-classed crowds of *A Cool Million*. The networked dynamics of the crowd, then, evoke a democratic sentiment that preserves an equality of condition as its primary basis of one's relation to the other.

This networked vision of democracy, part and parcel of the public culture that Hegeman identifies as an intrinsically modern phenomenon, perhaps repositions the crowd as a figure not of collectivity—reminiscent of Le Bon's fears of a crowd's "collective mind" bent on nothing short of absolute destruction—but of connectivity. And that particular brand of connectivity was facilitated by the mass media outlets of the day that brought so many into a common culture—or at least gave the appearance of such a common culture in contrast to the social stratifications of past eras. This re-articulation

of the crowd would emphasize its flattened, networked internal dynamics over the pernicious stereotypes long associated with so-called “crowd mentality”. Accordingly, the form of the crowd offers a utopian vision of social organization, though, as we have seen, the representation of its content tends to craft a particularly malicious rendering of the working classes.

Such a shift in focus from the collective to the connective allows us to imagine the possibilities of a truly flattened, public social organization—an organization well absent from American experience since the scene of the moderns. The passage of the century has only brought more connective ligatures of mass media, but a deepening engagement with crowds has not accompanied them. The crowd is, I hasten to add, a marked absence in today’s iterations of the network narrative genre, which tends to focus almost solely on six-degrees-of-separation structures in film. One might argue that is the nature of these mass media that have changed, favoring a more atomizing mode of reception—home entertainment systems, cellular reception of phone calls, news, and video, and so on—that in turn determines a more atomized mode of social organization. But such an explanation would overlook the similar functions of atomizing technologies of the modern period such as the phonograph parlors of the 1890s and early 1900s that were an important element of creating habits of entertainment consumption.⁴ What has changed seems more likely to be ideologies of the public in a shift toward privatization—a force motivating the collapse of civic and social institutions that Robert Putnam chronicles in his 2000 book *Bowling Alone*. West’s representation of crowds registers an ambivalence about the spontaneous manifestations of such

⁴ See “Talking and Singing Machines, Parlors, and Peep Shows” in David Nasaw’s *Going Out: The Rise and Fall of Public Amusements* (1993): 120-34.

public social formations, but even that ambivalence holds a utopian charge in the potential for a truly democratized social organization. That ambivalence seems completely disregarded today by the near-complete abandonment of crowd thinking and representation that is needed to reconsider the crowd as a model of networked organization.

CHAPTER 6 CODA

Nathanael West's investment in the crowd is but one manifestation of the myriad forms of network narration that occupied American modernism as a way of negotiating the modern period's dialectic of centralization and dispersal. West's networked crowds share a common project with the networked public spaces of Anita Loos's *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* and the networked forms of Jean Toomer's *Cane* and John Dos Passos's *U.S.A.* trilogy. To illustrate the breadth of the network narrative during this period—the constellar element of the genre that I have tried to demonstrate with this collage-like study of disparate texts—I want to conclude with a brief study in contrast. Because it exemplifies the kind of generic conventions David Bordwell ascribes to the network narrative, and indeed because it is one of the primary texts scholars point to when discussing the genre, Paul Haggis's *Crash* (2005) provides a useful counterpoint to the modes of network narration I have been discussing in American modernism.

Crash is symptomatic of a spate of films arriving in the mid-2000s—Alejandro Iñárritu's *Babel* and Stephen Gaghan's *Syriana*, both released in 2006, for example—that are built upon the same six-degrees-of-separation formula as *6°*, the television drama I discussed in the introduction. Together, these films and others released in the same narrow window called attention to the genre that Bordwell and others were touting as a relatively new development. The winner of the 2006 Academy Award for Best Motion Picture, *Crash* typifies Bordwell's narratological blueprint for the genre that he outlines in *Poetics of Cinema* (2008), as it stages chance as the motivator of the characters' networks, uses the traffic accident as a standard figuration of convergence, and locates its fundamental tension between accident and destiny. By isolating its

connective devices solely to the characterological mode of interpersonal networks, *Crash* provides a case study in some of the ideological assumptions that inform contemporary understandings of the network narrative genre, as well as the discourses of networks across the humanities.

The film revolves around eight character-threads, many of which manifest in pairs of figures: Detective Graham Waters (Don Cheadle) and Ria (Jennifer Esposito), police partners and lovers; Rick (Brendan Fraser) and Jean Cabot (Sandra Bullock), a wealthy, white, politically prominent couple carjacked early in the film; carjackers Anthony (Chris “Ludacris” Bridges) and Peter Waters (Larenz Tate), the wayward brother of the upstanding Det. Graham Waters; Farhad (Shaun Toub), the owner of a convenience store, and his daughter Dorri (Bahar Soomekh); Cameron (Terrence Howard) and Christine Thayer (Thandie Newton), an upperclass black couple struggling after she is molested by a racist LAPD officer; officer John Ryan (Matt Dillon), the racist cop whose father is suffering from the side effects of a urinary tract infection, and officer Tom Hansen (Ryan Phillippe), an idealist cop disgusted by the molestation who tries to vindicate himself when encountering Cameron Thayer the next day; Daniel (Michael Peña), a Hispanic locksmith and father of a young, lower-class family. Such a survey may seem an excessive detour, but of course that very kaleidoscopic profusion of characters is precisely Haggis’s focus. For the film offers very little in the way of plot beyond the marginal stories of each character-thread, stories that are insignificant beyond the coincidences that drive the characters into intersection. Typical of contemporary understandings of network narratives, the film focuses on the atomized

characters themselves and the chance intersections that draw them into loose connections.

Those chance connections often take place in the violence of a car crash. This is evident in the film's title, of course, but is not the only linking mechanism of the film. More often, the drawing of relational lines simply occurs through chance encounters. For example, the idealist officer Tom Hansen picks up a hitchhiker whom the audience recognizes as Peter Waters—not realizing that that afternoon he had been pursuing Waters in the near-carjacking of Cameron Thayer. During the car ride, Hansen takes offense to one of Waters's comments, and while pulling over to eject him from the car, an argument escalates to a tragic misunderstanding that results in Hansen shooting his passenger. And it gets worse for Hansen: the audience knows that the victim of his bullet was the wayward brother of Detective Graham Waters, a fast-rising lawman who swears to his mother that he will track down his brother's murderer. This contingent nature of the characters' convergences and entanglements is perhaps the defining feature of the network narrative, as Bordwell describes it.

In terms of its characterological networks and its contingent connections, *Crash* is more or less interchangeable with its peers, distinctive only in its overtly multicultural thematic of racial tolerance that complements the constellar project of the film's organization. It is fair to note, however, that there are other films from this period that conform to the characterological mode of network narration while also nodding toward other means of thinking networks. *Syriana*, for example, sketches the connective lines between commodities, markets, and people through the global oil trade, buttressing its characterological structure with treatment of the material mediators that facilitate the

characters' interrelationships. But by and large Bordwell is not inaccurate in describing the contemporary manifestation of network narratives in film as wholly invested in a characterological brand of networks.

The isolation of this mode of network narration in contemporary films confines the network's ideational role to subjective experience. For example, in the case of *Crash*, the network is ultimately less a tool for systemic analysis of the discursive and material concerns of race in America than it is a means for studying the subjective experience of race through a variety of perspectives—thus the film's privileging of racial tolerance over an emphasis on, say, poverty. This winnowing of the field—both in terms of aesthetics in form and content, and in terms of the critiques staged by network narratives—in contemporary narrative production draws a sharp contrast with the broad field of the genre in American modernism. Beyond the sheer aesthetic diversity of networking devices, what is distinctive about the American moderns' forays into the network narrative is their expansive use of the network as a conceptual tool. For these writers, the network provided a versatile conceptual tool for thinking the dynamic changes of their milieu—and not only the interconnections of people, but also the networked constitution of systems like race, class, history, and democracy, as my chapters have tried to demonstrate.

Moreover, such films demonstrate a residual trace of modernism in our contemporary discourses of networks. In a way, the characterological networks of films like *Crash* function somewhat similarly to the networks we have seen in the public spaces of the hotel or in crowd figuration. A characterological network relies on person-to-person relations that are unmediated, just as Loos's public spaces and West's

crowds erode institutional boundaries such as class and ethnicity. Whether it is in the fictional mode of Dos Passos's *U.S.A.* trilogy or in postmodern manifestations of the network narrative like *Crash*, characterological networks hold out a utopian wish for a social organization that is unmediated by institutional determinants. In fact, this rendering of networked representation might well represent a nostalgia for precisely the public culture of the modern period that organized public spaces and crowds as key articulations of the cultural logic of modernism. If that is the case, then the nostalgia of characterologically networked films like *Crash* signals a rather selective memory for what Hegeman refers to as modernism's "different arrangement of social space": it remembers the modern period's use of networks to flatten institutions into unmediated social organizations, but it forgets that those networked figurations also provided the moderns with conceptual tools to think democratic and even collective modes of the social—perhaps as telling a marker of historical amnesia as it is a shortcoming in our social imagination today.

Nascent and unarticulated though they often were, the moderns' experiments with networked representation mark a breadth of engagement with the possibilities for networks that contemporary network narratives seem uninterested in exploring. Part of this winnowing down may reflect the residual nature of networks in contemporary narrative and theoretical production, which I earlier described as a trace of the cultural logic of modernism that dealt with the period's dialectical tensions of centralization and dispersal. If that claim holds, it could well be that the onset of the digital revolution and other developments toward the close of the twentieth century resulted in a closing of the field of network possibilities—a post-hoc redefinition of the boundaries of networked

representation as well as a foreclosure of the network's versatility as a conceptual tool. To consider the network as a central figure of American modernism not only informs an intellectual history network discourses with their origins in the early twentieth century, but also brings our understanding of modernism's projects more closely into alignment with the way that modernists were beginning to think their own milieu.

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Wesley Beal received a Bachelor of Arts degree in English from Hendrix College in 2004 before coming to the University of Florida for graduate study. He received a Master of Arts degree in 2006, with a thesis on the conspiracy genre. During his doctoral study, he held a Grinter Fellowship and a Massey Dissertation Fellowship. His work in the classroom yielded two teaching awards: a University Writing Program teaching award and the prestigious VanderWerf Award, which is granted to the single highest-rated teacher in the Graduate School each year. As a graduate student at the University of Florida, he published on the submerged postcolonialism of *Blade Runner* in *Interdisciplinary Literary Studies*, and published a version of his master's thesis in *Genre*. A version of the dissertation chapter on John Dos Passos's *U.S.A.* trilogy is forthcoming from *Digital Humanities Quarterly* as part of a special issue he is co-editing.

After graduation, he begins a visiting assistant professorship at Lyon College. He and his wife Courtney are excited to know that their first child will be born an Arkansan.