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The Vernacular Sonnet and the Resurgence of Afro-Modernism in the 1940s

The decade framed by the outstanding success of Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940) and the Pulitzer Prize for Gwendolyn Brooks's *Annie Allen* (1949/50) brought momentous reorientations for African American literature. Whereas Wright had promoted social realism and open political protest, the Pulitzer signaled mainstream recognition for writers who negotiated racial concerns in a modernist poetic framework. And while Wright and the social realists could connect seamlessly to the post-Depression aesthetic of the 1930s, the resurgence of Afro-modernism after World War II is part of a more complicated lineage, as the diversity of scholarly accounts and periodizations attests.[1] One complication many of these accounts address is the fact that the poets who had pioneered modernist techniques during the Harlem Renaissance mostly faded from view in the 1930s, and those who remained influential—primarily Sterling Brown and Langston Hughes—turned to genres other than experimental poetry (Rampersad 1986, 215–22). The resurgence of Afro-modernism in the mid-1940s, which was propelled by poets, was thus a synthetic project from the beginning. Since they did not have a unified tradition to continue or reject, poets like Gwendolyn Brooks, Robert Hayden, and Melvin Tolson drew on a variety of sources, most importantly high-modernist formal experimentation and black vernacular speech, which they combined in a self-consciously artificial manner. This ambivalent aesthetic, I will argue in the following, found its earliest and paradigmatic expression in the unlikely form of the vernacular sonnet.

Since the vernacular was regarded with suspicion by the critical establishment both black and white (Bolden 2004, 13; Jackson 2011,

American Literature, Volume 87, Number 2, June 2015
DOI 10.1215/00029831-2886115

1–14), the poetic avant-garde of the 1940s needed an acceptable framework in which to explore a modernist vernacular poetics. This essay sets out to demonstrate that it was Langston Hughes, a highly regarded precursor figure for the postwar generation, who made the sonnet into such a framework. The first part of the essay identifies Hughes's now-forgotten sequence "Seven Moments of Love: An Un-Sonnet Sequence in Blues" (1940) as a nodal point in this development and argues that the dynamic behind these blues sonnets is best described, in terminology developed by Matthew Hart (2010), as "synthetic vernacular writing." As a second step, the essay traces the adoption and transformation of Hughes's strategies in the sonnets of the postwar generation—especially Brooks and Hayden—to show that his vernacular sonnets provided a generative matrix for the Afro-modernist project.

The sonnet had been a strikingly popular form in the Harlem Renaissance. Some of the signature poems of the period, including Claude McKay's "If We Must Die" (1919) and Countee Cullen's "Yet Do I Marvel" (1925), were sonnets. In fact, almost all poets of note tried their hand at the form, even Brown and Hughes, who otherwise propagated a specifically black poetics. What all sonneteers of the period had in common, however, was their reliance on a conventional formal and linguistic framework that jarred with the progressive politics of the New Negro movement. As a result, the sonnets Brown included in *Southern Road* (1932) seem dated and banal in comparison with his folk poetry, and the few sonnets Hughes published in the 1930s range from competent occasional poetry to derivative aestheticism (see Brown 1980, 106–13; Hughes 1937; Hughes [1932] 2001a). By the mid-thirties, the sonnet thus appeared to be a dead end for African American poetry. Among the poets who emerged later in the decade, even the most talented found it difficult to avoid the antiquated phrasing and stiff rhythms that seemed to come with the form. It is hardly surprising against this background that Owen Dodson, Melvin Tolson, and Margaret Walker abandoned the form after their unsuccessful early attempts (though Walker would return to it in the 1960s).[2]

It was Hughes who revived the sonnet by synthesizing it with the vernacular. In selecting "Seven Moments of Love" as the opening poem of his collection *Shakespeare in Harlem* (1942), Hughes signaled that the vernacular sonnet was pivotal in his return to the experimental blues poetry that had made his name (see Smethurst 1999, 144–46; Tracy 1988, 141–46). Neither his reviewers nor his later critics, how-

ever, seemed prepared to acknowledge this role (see Dace 1997, 279–95). Important topical studies like Steven Tracy's *Langston Hughes and the Blues* (1988), Frédéric Sylvanise's *Langston Hughes: Poète jazz, poète blues* (2009), and David Chinitz's *Which Sin to Bear? Authenticity and Compromise in Langston Hughes* (2013) ignore the sequence entirely, while Onwuchekwa Jemie, in his introduction to Hughes's poetry, only mentions it to reject the designation "love sonnets" in favor of "love blues" (1976, 43–44). James Edward Smethurst's *The New Red Negro*, which offers the only scholarly analysis of the sequence to date, strenuously emphasizes its deviations from the sonnet form (1999, 146–48). A detailed examination of "Seven Moments of Love," however, suggests that it was precisely the interplay of Western form and black vernacular influences that inspired Hughes's return to the Afro-modernist project.

In the brief prefatory statement of *Shakespeare in Harlem*, Hughes signals his strategy for managing this interplay. He will rely on the flexible oral expressivity of the blues to play around the unfinished edges:

> A book of light verse. Afro-Americana in the blues mood. Poems syncopated and variegated in the colors of Harlem, Beale Street, West Dallas, and Chicago's South Side.
>
> Blues, ballads, and reels to be read aloud, crooned, shouted, recited, and sung. Some with gestures, some not—as you like. None with a far-away voice.
>
> ([1942] 2001c, 19)

Rather than glossing over the divergent cultural sources of his poetry, Hughes announces, he will admit all of them into his poetry. It is precisely from the clashes between tradition and innovation, high culture and popular culture, white form and black sound, that the collection derives its creative force. The subtitle of "Seven Moments of Love"—"An Un-Sonnet Sequence in Blues"—exemplifies this strategy in that it playfully proclaims both its investment in and its disregard of the sonnet form. Both the productivity and the artifice of this strategy are captured by Hart's (2010) concept of "synthetic vernacular writing." The term plays on the double meaning of "synthetic," which connotes both fusion and craftsmanship, both dialectical sublation and artificially fabricated material, both the universal reach of the Hegelian model

and its inevitable failure in the modern world (9). As we will see, the vernacular sonnets of the 1940s and beyond aspire to a Western aesthetic of organic unity but at the same time jeopardize this unity by exposing it to the black idiom. Or, seen from the opposite angle, they draw on the authenticity of the vernacular but inevitably falsify that authenticity by adapting it to the requirements of a predetermined formal framework. Experimental writers were increasingly becoming aware of the creative promise of this dynamic in-between position, as Zora Neale Hurston's "Characteristics of Negro Expression" ([1934] 1970) attests, and it was Hughes who led the way in exploring this promise.

The synthetic quality of Hughes's blues sonnets manifests in their somewhat uneasy oscillation between spontaneity and artifice, spoken and written language, laughter and lamentation. Thematically, these sonnets position themselves in the blues tradition through typical leitmotifs—music, loneliness, the basic human needs of sleep, food, and love—and through the overarching theme of disappointed affection. The speaker has been left by his wife—a plight Hughes regarded as the archetypal blues situation (1958, 492)—and he responds with a show of buoyant independence that disintegrates into loneliness and desire as the sequence progresses. The individual poem titles indicate temporal progression and evoke the typical settings of the blues: "Twilight Reverie," "Supper Time," "Bed Time," "Pay Day" (Hughes 2001b, 24–28). The most productive technique Hughes adopts from the blues is repetition. He replaces the traditional rhyme schemes of the sonnet with pair rhymes and occasional triple rhymes, a practice that recalls the structural simplicity of common blues stanzas (AAA, AAB, AABB) and would inspire a certain legacy among the Black Arts poets. The second poem of the sequence, "Supper Time," illustrates both the new approach to rhyme and the frequent repetition of lines, words, and phrases in identical or slightly altered form: the repetitions serve as structuring devices on several levels: repetitions within lines, which occur as early as the first line ("I look in the kettle, the kettle is dry"), create a musical rhythm that carries over into the following lines. Anaphoric repetitions connect different rhyme pairs and draw attention to important motifs, such as the silence and loneliness suggested by the speaker's ability to hear his heartbeats and thoughts (lines 6–7). On a macrostructural level, the poem consists of three sections. The expository description of material deprivation

(lines 1–5) is linked by a pair rhyme to its causal source, the emotional deprivation that is the main theme of the poem (lines 6–10); as a conclusion the poem repeats the initial description—the motif, in blues terminology—of material deprivation (lines 11–14), indicating that the speaker, perhaps representing black folk in general, is forced to deal with material problems before he can indulge in emotional ones.

The wider significance of Hughes's repetitions is usefully captured by Tony Bolden's (2004) concept of "epistrophy." Coined by Thelonious Monk to name one of his jazz standards, the term signifies on the classical rhetorical device of epistrophe, the repetition of the end of a line or phrase for additional emphasis. Bolden draws on this etymology to argue that formal repetition, especially the allusive reference to genre conventions, is both subversive and affirmative: subversive because it demonstrates the iterability of supposedly authentic or essential conventions, for example by riffing on the blues tradition; affirmative because in the very act of simulating such conventions the poet revitalizes the "cultural (re)memory" associated with the "larger poetic tapestry" they represent (2004, 58–59, 100). Epistrophy can be traced on various levels in Hughes's sonnets. His use of pair rhymes, for example, can be read as an oblique, allusive form of epistrophy in that it suggests the repetitive structure of the blues and signifies on the more intricate stanzaic structure of the sonnet through ostentatious simplification. Hughes also incorporates traditional types of epistrophe and inflects them with the black vernacular and the themes and structures of the blues. In the last poem, for example, the speaker assures his beloved:

> And if you think I been mean before,
> I'll try not to be that mean no more.
> (Hughes 2001b, 27, lines 12–13)

In a larger perspective, such instances of epistrophy point to Hughes's appropriation of both the blues and the sonnet traditions, neither of which enters his sequence in its pure form. The very act of combining them signifies on the values and worldviews they are conventionally taken to represent. The synthetic construct of the blues sonnet disallows easy essentialisms like high culture versus low culture or artifice versus earthiness; it results in a "double-voiced utterance," as Bolden argues via Mikhail Bakhtin and Henry Louis Gates, that draws attention to the simulatedness of genre conventions and the cultural memories they convey (Bolden 2004, 58; cf. Gates 1988, xxiii).

Having identified the most pertinent blues structures in "Seven Moments of Love," we can now shift perspective and examine its transformation of the sonnet tradition. A first indicator comes in the ambivalent subtitle, "An Un-Sonnet Sequence in Blues," which summons the chronological order and causal relatedness of the traditional sonnet sequence while at the same time signaling its dissolution. The sequentiality is confirmed by the individual sonnet titles, which outline the progression from evening to night to morning and from workday to Sunday to payday. While this overarching frame and the many cross-references within the poems produce a tightly knit texture, however, the structure of the individual sonnets unravels in the course of the sequence. The first poem, which begins in sets of neat pair rhymes but ends with a triple rhyme, thus adding a disruptive fifteenth line, announces the direction that the sequence will take: both the rhyme scheme and the fourteen-line pattern will loosen as the sequence progresses. The fifth poem is the first not to start with a pair rhyme, and the two concluding poems considerably exceed the prescribed length, running to twenty and twenty-one lines respectively. The seventh poem has several rhyme pairs, however, which suggest a cyclical return to coherence reflecting the return of the speaker's hope for his marriage. In the world of Hughes's blues sonnets, unity is a possibility, but it is permanently under threat from outside forces and is never entirely achieved.

More effectively than McKay's protest sonnets, for example, Hughes's synthetic experiments turn the sonnet into a vehicle for African American voices and concerns. In the tradition of the blues, the speaker relates specific events from his personal experience, and he gives his narrative an oral quality by imagining spoken dialogues in every single poem: he talks to himself, to his feelings, to his alarm clock, and most importantly to the absent woman (Tracy 1988, 80; cf. Miller 1989, 33, 41). The sequence is thus a "speakerly text," in Gates's (1988, 191) terminology, "oriented toward imitating one of the numerous forms of oral narration to be found in . . . Afro-American vernacular literature." This vernacular heritage enters the sequence through the speaker's syntax, vocabulary, and pronunciation. In stark contrast to the predetermined structures of the traditional sonnet, Hughes derives the blues rhythms of his sequence from syntactic inversions and reductions ("I got to find me"), and he is careful to signal the oral layer of vernacular communication by transcribing typical pronunciation patterns ("Lawd").

This latter strategy inspires a momentous innovation in the African American sonnet: the systematic use of slant rhyme, which breaks through the formal strictness of traditional rhyme schemes to admit the flexibility of the vernacular. Hughes used slant rhyme in many of his blues poems and was promptly criticized for it in the first major study of his work, James Emanuel's volume in the Twayne series (Emanuel 1967, 138). Recent commentators have recognized its aptness for vernacular poetry, however, a judgment confirmed by a comparison with conventional black sonneteers of the time (Tracy 1988, 209–10). Many of Hughes's contemporaries were careful to avoid any trace of the vernacular in their sonnets and went so far as to use rhymes that emphasized British pronunciation, such as "prayer"/"air" in James C. Morris's "Christmas Motif" (1955, 47, lines 10–12). Where they used pair rhymes it was not to evoke black oral traditions but for juvenile versifying along the lines of "Farmers in shirt sleeves and jeans proudly walk, / The cardinal perched on last year's corn stalk"—the beginning of Estelle Eaton's "Spring-Time Scenes for the Painter" (1959, 17, lines 1–2). Hughes, by contrast, made slanted pair rhymes an integral element of his blues sonnets and, arguably, the most consequential manifestation of epistrophy in his poetry. He found it a highly suitable means of reflecting, on the formal level, the "tensions between repetition and improvisation" that characterize both the blues and the black oral tradition (Blount 1992, 583; cf. Bolden 2004, 29–30), and of conveying his synthetic vernacular poetics.

Hughes's critical writing indicates the poetological differences between his blues poetics and contemporary work that privileged either the African American or the European tradition. First and foremost, Hughes was never interested in simply transcribing vernacular speech in the manner of nineteenth-century dialect poets, and neither the blues music nor the vernacular expressions on which he drew were conceived in the terms of black-soil writers like Brown. "I'm not a Southerner," Hughes (1958, 492) explained. "I never worked on a levee. I hardly ever saw a cottonfield except from the highway. . . . Life is as hard on Broadway as it is in Blues-originating land. The Brill Building Blues is just as hungry as the Mississippi Levee Blues."[3] Hughes much preferred the blues he heard in the Manhattan vaudeville theaters, an urban blues responsive not so much to the Southern cotton field as to the responses and expectations of an ethnically mixed, culturally educated audience. One of his favorite singers was Lonnie Johnson, whose versatility and adaptability reflected Hughes's own conception of

the blues (Hughes 1941, 144; see Tracy 1988, 120). As for himself, Hughes made it clear that he was primarily a poet, not a musician, and that the blues was only one of the sources he tapped for inspiration (Tracy 1988, 107). His poetics of the in-between is evident from "Twilight Reverie," the very first sonnet in "Seven Moments of Love" ([1940] 2001b, 24), which begins,

> Here I set with a bitter old thought,
> Something in my mind better I forgot.
> Setting here thinking feeling sad.
> Keep feeling like this I'm gonna start acting bad.

The title of this sonnet denotes a typical blues situation but in an aestheticist vocabulary that seems self-consciously artificial. It contrasts strongly with the vernacular of the first lines: the explicitly transcribed "set" and the implicit slant rhyme of "thought" and "forgot." The following lines introduce the elliptical syntax of the black vernacular and the technique of epistrophy. Throughout the poem, the simple, oral diction and the speaker's practical attitude ironically undercut the aestheticist expectations raised by the title, and the conventional rigidity of the sonnet form is questioned by the freer rhythm of the blues. Instead of syllabic meter, the poem employs the loose accentual four-beat lines of blues songs, but the pair rhymes and the syntactic divisions can be read as suggesting a Shakespearean pattern. This reading, in turn, is undercut at the very end of the poem, where a fifteenth line—"It's dark on this stoop, Lawd! The sun's gone down"—exceeds the boundaries of the sonnet and asserts the unruly force of the blues.

Hart's concept of the "synthetic vernacular" captures several layers of this interplay between literary and everyday language, between the artificial and the authentic. Poets who write in a synthetic vernacular, Hart (2010, 8–9) argues, "embrace the formal and ideological complications between the universal and the particular" and navigate these complications in a language whose "materiality . . . refuses to disappear in the moment of overcoming." They are aware of the artificiality of the literary vernacular, an orally informed language that no one really speaks (Gates 1988, 215; Pollock 2002, 40), just as they are aware of its political significance. The vernacular is a "discourse of power," as Hart (2010, 12) puts it, but it has also been shown to disrupt power relations, especially those based on territorial categories such as "home" or "the local," from which the vernacular takes its name.[4] To vernacularize, Homi Bhabha (1996, 202) argues, "is to 'dialectize' as a process;

it is not simply *to be* in a dialogic relation with the native or the domestic, but it is to be on the border, *in between*," and thus to "displace . . . the domestic. But such resistance is not a 'negation' of the rule of the universal . . . it is to take your position at the point in space and time of the 'unexpected transformation.'" Hughes's synthetic vernacular reflects on the linguistic level the position of his sonnets in between the African and the European heritage, and more importantly, it activates the subversive potential of this in-between position.

The synthetic vernacular thus opened up new venues for African American poetry and for the sonnet in particular. At the same time, it raised a new set of challenges for poets. As Hart (2010, 9) points out, *synthetic* connotes fabrication, which accurately describes the creation process of vernacular poetry but collides with the expectations of both high-modernist and black aesthetics. Schematically put, the former acknowledges the importance of *artificium* (craftsmanship) in the creative process but expects an organically unified end product, while the latter regards the artificial as a defection from cultural authenticity. Hughes usually tried to accommodate both positions, but his blues sonnets are not entirely successful in this respect. Their departure from the stanzaic patterns of the blues takes away much of their musical quality, especially in comparison with the more traditional blues poems in *Shakespeare in Harlem*. The concluding couplets are not always effective, and the lines are too varied in length and content to establish the metrical and semantic rhythmicity that characterizes the blues.

It is indicative of these problems that the sonnets of "Seven Moments of Love," like many of the blues poems in the collection, covertly rely on the oral voice to achieve their musicality. Instead of speaking for themselves, they need to be "read aloud, crooned, shouted, recited, and sung," as Hughes (2001c, 19) admits in his preface to *Shakespeare in Harlem*. In modernist terms this is also a shortcoming in craftsmanship, a charge leveled most forcefully by Owen Dodson (1942) in his *Phylon* review of *Shakespeare in Harlem*. "Because verse is 'light,'" Dodson admonishes, "it doesn't therefore follow that anything goes." He calls the book "a careless surface job" hampered by the author's lack of "discipline." And indeed, there is a striking difference between the blues experiments at the beginning of the volume, which read more like song lyrics than like poems in their own right, and the more carefully crafted pieces later in the volume, which recall Hughes's pioneering blues poems from the 1920s. This does not take away from the historical

significance of these experiments, however. In exploring the synthetic vernacular, they illustrate the fundamental difficulty of striking a balance between the orality of the black vernacular and the exigencies of the high-cultural sonnet tradition.

This difficulty turned out to be both persistent and productive in the postwar period. The two defining poets of that period, Gwendolyn Brooks and Robert Hayden, continued Hughes's experiments and made the synthetic vernacular sonnet a cornerstone of their poetics. The first of the two to gain widespread attention, Brooks was in regular communication with Hughes from her late teens on, and she continued to acknowledge him as an important influence throughout her career (Kent 1990, 27, 40, 60, 112). She shares with the older poet a concern with black daily life, a focus on the deferred dreams of the lower classes, and a pioneering role in the transition toward modernist technique in African American poetry (Melhem 1987, 23; Shaw 1980, 62–64; Smith 1983, 44). Brooks also admired Hughes as a craftsman, a fellow innovator of black poetry, and, particularly after her 1967 conversion to the Black Arts movement, as a critic of racial injustice (Brooks 1970, 11–13; cf. Smethurst 2005, 238). The interplay of integrationism and radicalism, of high modernism and social realism, that characterizes her oeuvre can be traced directly to her engagement with Hughes's synthetic vernacular sonnets.

Given her admiration for Hughes, it is almost certain that Brooks read *Shakespeare in Harlem*, and she followed its example in "dialectizing" the sonnet form in both senses of the term (see Kent 1984, 90; Leonard 2006, 119–21). Like the soldiers in the opening sonnet of her 1945 sequence "Gay Chaps at the Bar," she "knew white speech" ([1945] 1971, 48, line 8), which allowed her to claim the cultural authority of modernist avant-garde poetry. At the same time, she asserted her affiliation with the black tradition by inflecting this "white speech" with vernacular elements: characteristic words and phrases, racially charged images, allusions to black popular culture, and, most importantly, slant rhyme. The slant rhymes in the opening sonnet, "gay chaps at the bar" (Brooks lowercases individual poem titles), are primarily an expression of the soldiers' disconcerting war experience. The ruptures in the pure, harmonic rhymes of the traditional sonnet reflect the cacophony of frontline battle and its devastating effect on the mental stability of the soldiers, who have been trained in the very tradition of "gaiety in good taste" and "smart, athletic language" that the poem discards (Kent 1972, 106–7).

While the artificiality of rhymes like "islands"/ "talents" seems to preclude a vernacular reading, there are also rhymes that evoke the sort of orality we find in Hughes:

> We knew how to order. Just the dash
> Necessary. The length of gaiety in good taste
> Whether the raillery should be slightly iced
> And given green, or served up hot and lush.
> (Brooks 1971, 48, line 1–4)

The characteristic pronunciations indicated by "dash"/ "lush," as by "women"/ "omen" in the following quatrain, blend with other allusions to the black vernacular: the imagery of "The summer spread, the tropics, of our love"; the racially charged vocabulary of "white speech," "holler," and "lions" that enters the poem toward the end. All of these references remain oblique, and the overall reading experience is dominated by the convoluted, image-laden style of Western high modernism suggested by the opening quatrain. But their presence, unobtrusive as it is, suffices to launch a dialectical and dialectizing interchange between black and white speech, between the soldiers' residual cultural identities and the dominant societal narratives that occlude such identities. This latter aspect is underscored by the poem's evasiveness about the speaker's race. The generic title "gay chaps at the bar" suggests a transracial experience, and it is not until halfway through the poem that the speaker's blackness is confirmed. The irony of this inverted confirmation—it is his claim that he knows "white speech" that marks him as black—points to the relationality both of cultural and linguistic categories.

Not only does Brooks use slant rhyme more widely than Hughes, but she also draws on the classic rhetorical patterning of the sonnet. "Each sonnet articulates a desire," Ann Stanford (1992, 202) suggests in her reading of the sequence, "and an oppositional reality, a pull toward the truth."[5] This dialectical setup, which Petrarch and Shakespeare had established in some of their love sonnets, contributes to Brooks's realistic description of lower-class life and suggests a demystifying conception of love reminiscent of Hughes's blues poetry (Davis 1963, 114–25; Kent 1984, 88–105; Smith 1983, 46). Brooks's novel approach, particularly striking in comparison with earlier African American love sonnets, combines the unsparing social realism of Wright's *Native Son* and the scientific approach of two other fellow Chicago intellectuals, St. Clair Drake and Horace Cayton, whose landmark study of black urban life, *Black Metropolis*, appeared in the same year as "Gay Chaps

at the Bar" (K. Williams 1987, 50–53). There is no trace of genteel sentimentality or uplift optimism in her sonnets, but neither is there anger or protest openly directed at a white readership.

The synthetic vernacular of the *Bronzeville* sonnets serves several purposes. It infuses a presumably nonracial form with a racial message, or in terms borrowed from the first and last lines of "gay chaps at the bar," it disrupts the "order" of the sonnet with the "holler" of the black speakers (see Duncan 2010, 41; Melhem 1987, 42). And it provides a link between the two main tenets of Brooks's aesthetic: social-realist description and modernist experimentation. Signaling both authenticity and innovation, the synthetic vernacular allows Brooks to study black life with no apparent concern for the white reader's response, to discard the prescribed length and meter of the traditional sonnet, and thus to disentangle her poetry from restrictive expectations from either side.

As we have seen, it was Hughes who introduced the synthetic vernacular as a medium of 1940s Afro-modernism and first explored these transformative strategies. Brooks continued in this line but tried to avoid some of the problems Hughes had encountered, especially the problem of artificiality. While she adopted aesthetically innovative elements such as slant rhyme, she used the vernacular more sparingly than Hughes. Her firm commitment to a modernist aesthetic led her to regard the vernacular as a technical device rather than a rivaling cultural poetics. But her attempt to reconcile this modernist aesthetic with the black everyday experience held pitfalls of its own, and the "Gay Chaps at the Bar" sequence as a whole shows a certain unevenness in voice and style. It has been faulted for overly intricate and "archaic" diction, and while some of this criticism simply reflects contemporary black critics' wariness of experimental poetry, it does indicate how precarious the balance between realist description and modernist style remains in Brooks's sonnets (Gray 1990, 183). In our context, the most striking problem of the sequence is its failure to sustain the style, and thus the vernacular-inflected voice, established in the beginning. The two "love notes" sonnets toward the end of the sequence (Brooks 1971, 57, 58), for example, sound very much like Brooks herself, as opposed to the soldiers whose voice they ostensibly record. They discard the black vernacular altogether in favor of a refracted, alienated voice reminiscent of Cummings, but they fail to evoke the visceral emotionality of Cummings's more successful poems,

which leaves them indistinguishable at times from the sentimental outpourings of contemporary amateur poets. It seems that the vernacular remained indispensable to the new poetics, and those of Brooks's sonnets that make use of its dialectizing effect became signal achievements of Afro-modernist poetry.

While the importance of these sonnets to Brooks's early success as a poet has been widely recognized, it is little known that Robert Hayden, who would emerge as the other major African American poet of the period, was busily working away at his own sonnets at the same time. These sonnets, we will see in the following, were instrumental in transforming Hayden's style from the imitative juvenilia of his first collection, *Heart-Shape in the Dust* (1940), to the vernacular modernism that made his reputation. A decisive impetus for this transformation came from Hughes, who pointed the young poet to the immaturity of his early work (Fetrow 1984, 48–51; P. Williams 1987, 15). "Seven Moments of Love" appeared shortly after this exchange and, given Hayden's acknowledgment of Hughes as an early influence, provided a likely model for the vernacular sonnets Hayden crafted in the 1940s (Hayden 1984, 94, 118).

Hayden's best-known sonnet is "Frederick Douglass," which he chose as the concluding poem of the three collections that made his name, *A Ballad of Remembrance* (1962), *Selected Poems* (1966), and *Angle of Ascent* (1975). Few readers of these collections are aware, however, that "Frederick Douglass" is a product of the mid-1940s. Hayden wrote a first version as part of a series of five educational sonnets on African American history (Chrisman 2001, 133–34). After discarding the other sonnets, he completely revised "Frederick Douglass" and published a second version, which is almost identical with the final version, in the February 1947 issue of *Atlantic Monthly*.[6] The genesis of "Frederick Douglass" exemplifies Hayden's development toward a vernacular modernist poetics and the role of the sonnet in this development.

The first version, like all of Hayden's early sonnets, is written in conventional, somewhat derivative standard English and, though unrhymed, follows a traditional Petrarchan pattern. The sestet illustrates both the problems and the promise of his approach:

> Douglass, O colossus of our wish
> and allegory of us all, one thinks
> of you as shipwrecked voyagers think of
> an island. Breasting waters mined with doubt

and error, we struggle toward your dream of man
unchained, of man permitted to be man.
(quoted in Chrisman 2001, 135)

The germs of the final version are already visible here: Douglass is praised in terms of his achievement for the black community, and the concluding lines gesture toward the pulsating rhythm and soaring rhetoric for which the poem became known. As it stands, however, this version suffers from overly formal language. Some of its imagery is random and derivative ("shipwrecked voyagers"); it spells out what it ought to express ("allegory of us all"); and the line breaks interrupt rather than accentuate the flow of the poem.

What distinguishes the later versions from the first, I contend, is a turn to the vernacular—not in the sense of dialect or signifying, but as a rhythmic, stylistic, and semantic principle. Hayden retained the elevated diction and vocabulary characteristic of his poetry, but he embedded them in a chant-like rhythm and oral style reminiscent of the folk sermons James Weldon Johnson (1927) had first identified as stylistic models for a black vernacular poetry. These changes make not only the language but also the speaking voice more accessible: whereas the first version, with its technical vocabulary, was clearly spoken by a poet, the later versions are spoken by the people.

When it is finally ours, this freedom, this liberty, this beautiful
and terrible thing, needful to man as air,
usable as earth; when it belongs at last to all,
when it is truly instinct, brain matter, diastole, systole,
reflex action; when it is finally won; when it is more
than the gaudy mumbo jumbo of politicians:
this man, this Douglass, this former slave, this Negro
beaten to his knees, exiled, visioning a world
where none is lonely, none hunted, alien,
this man, superb in love and logic, this man
shall be remembered. Oh, not with statues' rhetoric,
not with legends and poems and wreaths of bronze alone,
but with the lives grown out of his life, the lives
fleshing his dream of the beautiful, needful thing.
(Hayden 1962, 71)[7]

It is in shifting the emphasis from the hero to his people, from abstraction to lived reality, from declamation to expressivity, that the vernacu-

lar becomes a semantic principle of the poem in this final version. The new "Frederick Douglass" is still a praise sonnet, but one that reverses the conventions of poetic tribute along with the order of octave and sestet. It opens not with the hero but with the hopes and aspirations of his people, the collective "we," and claims the hero's central goal, freedom, as the natural right of the people rather than a gift handed them by the hero. It emphasizes from the beginning that the hero has not fully accomplished his goal, that freedom is not "finally won." The very first word of the poem effects a double displacement of the celebratory impulse, into the future and into the conditional, so that the hero's status remains dependent on the fate of his people: if they truly achieve freedom he will be remembered; if not, he will have failed. These reversals dissolve the hierarchies of hero worship into a celebration of the humanity that Douglass shares with all African Americans. They strike a balance between the individual and the collective by opening with the collective and delaying the very mention of Douglass's name to the second part of the poem: the individual is introduced as part of the community but, given that his appearance marks the sestet-octave division, as a defining force within that community (W. Williams 1977, 740).

In foregrounding the self-expression of the black community, the new versions balance the high-modernist artifice that had already characterized the first version against the flowing rhythm, engaging style, and collective voice of the black vernacular. The flexible accentual meter of the new versions, an important innovation in the African American sonnet, is reminiscent of experimental poets like Gerard Manley Hopkins (whom Hayden once cited as an influence) but also of blues poetry in the vein of Hughes's vernacular sonnets (Hayden 1984, 185–86). The vernacular of "Frederick Douglass"—as of other classic Hayden poems, for example "Middle Passage" and the sonnet-variant "Those Winter Sundays" (Harper 2001, 106; Huddle 2001, 251)—is thus a synthetic vernacular in several senses of the term. It derives its energy from the dialectic interplay between European and African American traditions; it self-reflexively enacts this dialectic, thus showing an awareness of its artificial quality; and yet it pursues the aesthetic and political ideal of synthesizing the words of black people—past, present, and future—into a collective voice.

When Hayden contrasts the living memory of the people with unconvincingly static tributes like "statues" and "wreaths of bronze," he might be reflecting on the difference between the original and later

versions of his own poem. By complementing his modernist poetics with a vernacular element, he has avoided the somewhat stilted declamation and derivative imagery of the first version and has merged his tribute into the collective memory he envisions as Douglass's greatest legacy. This multilevel synthesis became a crucial element not only of Hayden's mature poetics but of the entire Afro-modernist project. The poets and poems discussed in this essay indicate some of its manifestations: Hughes retained a considerable measure of vernacular words and structures; Brooks developed a dense modernist idiom occasionally informed by the vernacular; and Hayden remained wary of vernacular speech but drew on its rhythms and the collective spirit it evoked. In addition to these representative examples, the synthetic vernacular surfaced in many works of Afro-modernist poetry, drama, and prose of the time, including classics like Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952) and Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959). Its legacy can be traced all the way to twenty-first-century poetry, some of whose major practitioners cite Hughes, Brooks, and Hayden as precursor figures (Nelson and Dove 1998, 169).

These developments suggest that the vernacular and the sonnet were important factors in the resurgence of Afro-modernism, and that both were transformed in the process. The sonnet was not so much a "white" form as an interactive form for Afro-modernist poets: a formal framework signaling that African American themes and concerns merited the same attention as those of European canonic poetry, but also that African American expressive strategies could rival, alter, and enrich one of the most durable forms of the European tradition. The vernacular, on the other hand, was disentangled from minstrelsy, dialect verse, and parochial conceptions of black cultural authenticity. As one element among many of an experimental modernist poetics, it became widely acceptable to the black intellectual avant-garde. If the "indisputable modern moment in Afro-American discourse" arrived, as Houston Baker (1987, 92–93) argues, with Sterling Brown's inclusion of the blues into his "masterful" poetry, it was Hughes's synthesis of the blues with the sonnet that brought the vernacular into high modernism. This unlikely synthesis opened a way into the literary mainstream for the postwar generation and anticipated the productive ambivalences that would pervade the Afro-modernist project in the 1940s and beyond.

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Notes

1 See, for example, Baker (1987), Brooker (2000, 240–42), Jackson (2011, 206–18), Patterson (2000), Sanders (1999), Scanlon (2000), and Smethurst (1999, 144–207).

2 See, for example, Dodson's "Negro History: A Sonnet Sequence" (1936, 21), Margaret Walker's sonnets in *For My People* ([1942] 1990, 53–58), and Tolson's "Sonnets" section in *Rendezvous with America* (1944, 57–70). For a brief discussion of Dodson's sequence, see Woodson (2011, 17–20). Walker did publish a few sonnets later on, including a successful tribute to Malcolm X (Randall and Burroughs 1969, 32–33).

3 For an early, essentialist account of Hughes's blues poetry that fails to recognize this synthetic element, see Kent (1972, 53–75). Houston Baker (1984, 5) holds a similar view but points out that even the rural Southern blues was already an ongoing "synthesis" of such diverse elements as "work songs, group seculars, field hollers, sacred harmonies, proverbial wisdom, folk philosophy, political commentary, ribald humor, elegiac lament, and much more."

4 For definitions and discussions of the vernacular, see Lemke (2009, 11–51); and Scanlon (2003, 220–23).

5 Similarly, Stacy Hubbard (1992, 53) speaks of a "progression . . . from a hierarchy of imperatives, through a seeming lapse or digression . . . which threatens to reverse the called-for sequence, to a re-assertion of the original hierarchy."

6 In the final version, Hayden substituted "to all" for "to our children" at the end of line 3.

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