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Rewriting the Genealogy of Minstrelsy for Modernity: “Cry and Sing, Walk and Rage, Scream and Dance”

The American Negro must remake his past in order to make his future. —Arthur Schomburg, “The Negro Digs Up His Past” (1925)

“**T**he low life of your people is exotic. It has a splendid, fantastic quality” (107), a white character tells an aspiring black writer in Carl Van Vechten’s *Nigger Heaven* (1926). “I don’t think the Negro has been touched in literature as yet,” the white man ignorantly concludes. Van Vechten’s novel became one of the Harlem Renaissance’s most controversial productions. Two years later, in 1928, the putative father of black modernity, W. E. B. Du Bois, published *Dark Princess: A Romance*. There, he faced the problematic cultural legacy of the “low life” of his people. In order to confront this legacy, he produced a fantastical romance of racial uplift written in a robust realist style. The result is a visionary allegory about the end of European dominance in Asian and African colonies and the defeat of American race prejudice. At the story’s center, Du Bois placed an African American cosmopolitan who pointedly uses the Spirituals, the songs of enslaved African people, to interrogate the condescending assumptions of cultural superiority he encounters. When Van Vechten read Du Bois’s book, he called it “asinine” (qtd. in Bernard 280). Regardless, *Dark Princess* remained Du Bois’s “favorite book” (*Dusk* 270).

Matthew Towns, Du Bois’s sensitive, hyper-refined hero, finds himself torn between his self-imposed duty to reform the world and his predilection for beauty and bohemianism. He discovers that he can reconcile these ambitions through songs, which he performs at strategic junctures in the novel. This seems innocuous enough. Yet Du Bois’s tactics are more problematic than they appear at first glance because they force readers to confront one of modernity’s most difficult problems: the legacy of blackface minstrelsy.

From the early 1800s onwards, American blackface minstrel shows featured songs, sketches and dances, most often performed by whites in burnt-cork makeup. Later in the nineteenth century, minstrelsy incorporated Spirituals. By the beginning of the twentieth century, the forms had become intertwined. While most regarded them both as instances of African American “low” culture, one originated among whites and the other among blacks. Twentieth-century artists also had to address the derogatory way in which minstrelsy represented black people. Indeed, minstrelsy offered a paradoxical mixture of appreciative mimesis and denigrating perversion, a bittersweet hodgepodge Eric Lott aptly describes as the result of white “love and theft” of African American culture.¹

Set in the early 1920s, Du Bois’s *Dark Princess* positions itself at the center of important early twentieth-century conversations about what constitutes black culture by posing difficult questions: what are the distinctive ideas and artistic customs of African Americans, and how can they take their place on the world stage? These questions bring into view the ambition of Du Bois’s novel: transforming minstrelsy’s reviled legacy. The question also brings full circle the observations about cosmopolitan culture Du Bois had made a quarter of a century earlier in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), a landmark of African American sociology and literary history. “I sit with

Shakespeare and he winces not. Across the color line I move arm in arm with Balzac and Dumas," he wrote. "I summon Aristotle and Aurelius and what soul I will, and they come all graciously with no scorn nor condescension" (*Souls* 76). Du Bois noted that racist America shunned him because of his skin color, whereas great art was never so prejudiced. In 1928, *Dark Princess* asked a logically consequent question, one which would come to define the strivings of African American modernists. Could African American culture move across the color line and take its place alongside the world's greatest works of art? In this essay, I address this question by tracing a genealogy between early twentieth-century African American writing and two bifurcating branches of nineteenth-century dandyism: the European dandy tradition we associate with Charles Baudelaire and Oscar Wilde, and the blackface dandy tradition of the minstrel show. As we will see, tracing the fascinating lines of transmission between these forms reveals a hidden but vital embranchment of literary modernity's family tree. When examined more closely, a gnarled and forgotten history suddenly reveals itself.

Dandyism and minstrelsy have become significant subjects of inquiry for modernist scholarship.² Telling the story of minstrelsy's twentieth-century transformation deepens and develops ideas suggested in the 1990s by two classic studies. Eric Sundquist's *To Wake the Nations: Race in the Making of American Literature* argues that minstrelsy "ensnared the African American artist in a constant awareness and estimation of the effect of the color line upon his professional aspirations and his literary materials" (275). George Hutchinson's *The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White* notes the disparity in the treatment of African American modernity in literary criticism:

between black and white modernisms there would seem to be little common ground. Black modernism, one might conclude, is the inverse of white modernism, its exuberantly subversive "other," or perhaps a revolting Caliban to Europe and white America's debunked Prospero. And yet the writers of the Harlem Renaissance, if we are to believe the testimony, did not see things this way. They consider themselves participants in, and the potential vanguard of, an *American Modernist* movement. (29-30; emphasis added)

Much has been written about modernists' relationship to derogatory forms of blackness. We know that "artists 'went primitive'—formally—to become modern" (29-30), as Sieglinde Lemke notes in *Primitivist Modernism*. To speak itself into existence, modernism sometimes spoke through the voice of another. The language of modernity therefore involved a measure of what Michael North has called "racial ventriloquism" (9). Yet it wasn't only white writers who resorted to this practice.

Minstrelsy as we know it—by which I mean the form born of T. D. Rice's "Jump Jim Crow" in the 1830s—is a bastard cultural form. It was the misbegotten offspring of a white man's attempt to translate an African American verbal and visual vernacular into the racialized language of nineteenth-century popular entertainment. By today's standards the translation did not go well (it played on the language of ridicule and contempt), but it begat legions of imitators, black and white, all the way through to the twentieth century.³ Today, the form lives on in an attenuated but iconic manner through the language of commodity culture—in American brands with names including Aunt Jemima and Uncle Ben and, in the United Kingdom and elsewhere in Europe and Africa, in such products as Galaxy Minstrels, the shiny milk chocolate confections manufactured by Mars Incorporated.

Although one might imagine that early twentieth-century black modernists would have seized the opportunity to smother and silence the mongrel voice of minstrelsy, in fact they did no such thing. Minstrel tropes are ubiquitous in black modernist literature. Wallace Thurman, Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, and Alain Locke all use, interrogate and revise the form. They did this, as this essay demonstrates, because of the chiasmic relationship between minstrelsy and black

modernity. To acknowledge these continuities, we need to attend to the ideas shared between both forms, including the recovery of the primitive minstrel mask, the interrogation of this grotesque caricature,⁴ the ambivalent fascination and engagement with the past, and the examination of “bad” or “failed” cultural forms.

For more than two decades now, Du Bois’s relationship to minstrelsy has been on the critical radar, but critics have rarely related it to dandyism. In a 1997 essay, Scott Herring observed that Du Bois removed “‘the minstrel mask’ from his entire race” (3). Monica Miller’s 2006 analysis of black dandyism’s heritage contends that *Dark Princess* inaugurates a modern conception of race “by removing the corrupting effects of blackface” from Matthew’s performance of black dandyism (“Black Dandy” 194). *Slaves to Fashion*, Miller’s 2009 monograph, revises this position to assert that “instead of simply removing the burnt cork from the dandy figure associated with minstrelsy . . . Du Bois creates a dandy who . . . racialized his aesthetics” (159). These positions are problematic for several reasons. First, they do not take into account Du Bois’s evolving perspective on minstrelsy. Second, they do not account for the tactical and pointed use of song at key moments in *Dark Princess*. Third, and most important, they do not consider the generalized sense among Harlem Renaissance writers that minstrelsy is historically and culturally woven into (and therefore ineradicable from) the fabric of American culture. This essay contends that Du Bois’s dandy does not seek to *remove* the minstrel mask but rather to *don* it strategically in order to trouble cultural classifications.

Spirituals and the Legacy of Minstrelsy

When Du Bois wrote *The Souls of Black Folk* in 1903, he wanted music to confront readers. This is why he decided to head the book’s chapters with bars from traditional African American spirituals and epigraphs by Browning, Lowell, and Schiller. This makes for a visually striking start to each essay. The misapprehended oral black lyric sits alongside the “literate” white world lyrics and, symbolically, they cross the color line together. The book’s paratext reinforces in dulcet tones its essays’ insistence on the African American as “a co-worker in the kingdom of culture” (*Souls* 9).

Souls was a plea to recognize African American spirituals as art. Twenty-five years later, in *Dark Princess*, Du Bois outlined how to accomplish this. The novel’s hero, Matthew Towns, is a cosmopolitan (as his surname suggests), but he is also a man in search of his voice. To complicate matters, he does not feel that his culture can speak for him. *Dark Princess* eloquently articulates its hero’s predicament: Matthew “felt his *lack* of culture audible” (24; emphasis added). Confronted with this absence, Towns raises his voice and sings his culture into legitimacy. As a result, he hears his own voice for the first time. By lifting his voice, Matthew actualizes Du Bois’s assertion, in *Souls*’ final chapter, that African American spirituals constitute the United States’ greatest contribution to global culture. Du Bois writes:

The Negro folk-song—the rhythmic cry of the slave—stands today not simply as *the sole American music*, but as the most beautiful expression of human experience born this side of the seas. It has been neglected, it has been, and is, half despised, and above all *it has been persistently mistaken and misunderstood*; but notwithstanding, it still remains as the singular spiritual heritage of the nation and the greatest gift of the Negro people. (*Souls* 167–68; emphasis added)⁵

Du Bois explained that slaves were stubbornly misunderstood because they “were caricatured on the ‘minstrel’ stage” (*Souls* 168). He condemned “the Negro ‘minstrel’ songs” as “debasements and imitations” of the original spirituals (171).

Yet just a few years before he began writing *Dark Princess*, Du Bois's position on minstrelsy changed. In a 1924 essay titled "Negro Art and Literature," he wrote that when African Americans began to perform minstrelsy, they began to redeem it. "No sooner had the Negro become the principal in the minstrel shows than he began to develop and uplift the art" (321), Du Bois argued, indicating the approach that would soon inspire his novel's hero. "Negroes themselves began to appear as principals in minstrel companies after a time; indeed as early as 1820 there was an 'African company' playing in New York," he wrote. "This took a long time but eventually there appeared Cole and Johnson, Ernest Hogan and Williams and Walker. Their development of a new light comedy marked an epoch and Bert Williams was at his recent death without doubt the leading comedian on the American stage" ("Negro Art" 321).

By 1927, when he began writing *Dark Princess*, Du Bois had come to believe that minstrelsy could be a vehicle for black artistic expression. He acknowledged the idea that, faced with no other recognized cultural outlet, talented black performers transformed minstrelsy and "uplifted" it. Ironically, it was *through* minstrelsy that African Americans began to transcend it. This highlights a vital paradox in Du Bois's lifelong advocacy of African American art and artists: his castigation of minstrelsy's deleterious effects sits unabashedly alongside his desire to see black contributions to minstrelsy acknowledged.

Du Bois wished to emphasize the formal beauty and power of spiritual performances, but in *Dark Princess* he also granted the minstrel form agency. In doing so, he invites us to see the lines of transmission between African American and white performers, including their European counterparts. Minstrelsy and spirituals intertwine like branches of a family tree and record a miscegenated history laden with ambiguities, animosity and affection. It seems as though the Harlem Renaissance would seek most ardently to expunge just such a genealogy. Yet in Du Bois we find precisely the opposite. Despite the conspicuous parallels he establishes with European traditions, the rich and highly problematic legacy of blackface minstrel dandyism lies just below the novel's surface.

In the United States, the dandy figure was tightly enmeshed in the history of slavery and minstrelsy. The pretentious black dandy was a favorite object of ridicule in minstrel shows: "Dandy Jim," "Long Tail Blue," the "Gay Cavalier" and "Zip Coon" were some of the names for this perennial favorite among the casts of ostentatiously dressed minstrel characters who pranced and strutted for the amusement of audiences inclined to find humor in social pretension. Racial considerations aside, the dandy was laughable because he presented "the bourgeois playing at being an aristocrat" (Clark 34)—an especially precarious position to adopt in nineteenth-century American popular culture, where elites were viewed with suspicion.

Dandy Jim and his brethren—familiar across the United States and Europe—rapidly became regulars on the minstrel circuit. Their ostentatious songs, routines and stump speeches lampooned those who dedicated themselves to cultivating superficiality. His signature tune, "Dandy Jim from Caroline," became a staple of the minstrel circuit in the 1840s. The song extols the virtues of realizing one's ambition through personality and pluck. "I was de best lookin . . . in de County O, I look in de glass an I found it so" (Mahar 212), Jim croons before setting out to court his beloved by means of carefully chosen clothes and strategic *cartes de visite*. In Long Tail Blue's signature song, he boasts of his vast wardrobe and its usefulness, explaining, "If you want to win the Ladie's [*sic*] hearts / I'll tell you what to do; / Go to a tip-top Tailor's shop, / And buy a long tail blue" (Lewis 258). Zip Coon, "a larned skoler," was also mocked for being a fancy man who intends to "hab de pretty girls."

These figures had exceptional longevity, as Du Bois knew only too well. "Minstrel companies imitating Negro songs and dances and blackening their faces gained a

great vogue until long after the Civil War” (“Negro Art” 321), he wrote in 1924, six decades after the Emancipation Proclamation. While the popularity of minstrelsy declined significantly in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the racial ideas and stereotypes that minstrel shows generated and embodied never really died out. Du Bois’s deployment of Spirituals and dandyism evokes the most problematic tropes of minstrel dandyism (fashionable taste and dress combined with songs) yet makes them new. By connecting blackface minstrel dandyism to its European counterpart, the Harlem Renaissance acknowledged a shared legacy. Like a long-lost relative resurfacing to reveal a family secret, dandyism is the communal ancestor that connects blackness to whiteness, America to Europe, and African American cosmopolitanism to modernism.

***Dark Princess: A Romance* (1928)**

Dark Princess opens with its black hero Matthew Towns “in a cold white fury” (3). Though a promising medical student, he has been forbidden from training as an obstetrician in the United States. “Do you think that white women patients are going to have a nigger doctor delivering their babies?” the dean of the university says to explain this institutional racism. Taking a radical approach, Matthew chooses exile. He boards a boat for Europe and chooses expatriation. He gives up the belief that society rewards hard work with recognition. “There was a moment then when I loved America,” he says, “I cannot conceive it now” (146). Surprisingly, Du Bois’s idealistic novel begins with the abrupt end of ordinary American racial idealism. Matthew can no longer swallow the line that race “prejudice was a miasma that character burned away” (12).

Dark Princess’s subtitle, *A Romance*, points to the narrative’s double valence. It is the story of the love affair between Matthew and Kautilya, a beautiful Indian princess, as well as it is the story of the ideological romance that propels the narrative. *Dark Princess* thus foregrounds its intention to challenge one of the United States’ most cherished ideas about itself, the notion that it is a land of progress and possibility for all. The love lost between the hero and the U. S. is the spur for the novel’s political reorientation. “All my fine theories of race and prejudice lay in ruins” (14), Matthew observes. Betrayed by his own country, it is in Europe that Matthew rebuilds these fragments into a coherent identity: that of the cosmopolitan dandy.

Away from American prejudices, Du Bois’s hero elaborates a new “life-theory” (13). This time, clothes substitute for character. Alain Locke, well known as one of the Harlem Renaissance’s consummate dandies, had undergone a similar transformation. “I’m not going to England as a Negro,” he told his mother in 1907 when he went to Oxford as the first African American Rhodes scholar, “I will leave the color question in New York” and become “really cosmopolitan” (qtd. in Stewart 412, 428). Du Bois’s hero attempts to do the same. Abroad, Matthew carries himself with distinction and is “dressed carefully” (*Dark Princess* 7). He sports a new suit and tie accessorized with a gentlemanly cane and gloves. When he enters a “fashionable café with an air,” the effect is immediate and total: he “was treated as he was dressed” (7). Matthew’s dandyism acts as a mode of racial resistance that inoculates him against prejudice.

The Harlem Renaissance’s literary use of resistant dandyism and ironic distancing marks out the difference between a narrative’s character and the deliberately racialized and stereotyped personae he may sometimes perform in the narrative. The two methods underscore the character’s dialectical relationship with conventions and challenge the assumptions of the racist world.⁶ Consequently, they testify to the

character's agency and demand that readers follow their intricate and irregular maneuvers. I use the expressions "resistant dandyism" and "ironic distancing" to highlight the specific energies animating the Harlem Renaissance's engagement with dandyism and minstrelsy. These concepts operate in black modernism continuously with the ironic stances that nineteenth-century blackface minstrels sometimes adopted to critique that form from the inside. These two concepts complement and augment Houston Baker's argument that "talking black" became a means of "talking back"; in other words, that speaking through the minstrel mask became a liberating strategy (Baker 31).

What does Du Bois's strategy mean for African American modernity? *Dark Princess* serves as an object lesson. Resistant dandyism and ironic distancing signpost the gap between desire for transcendence and the real world unachievability of such a goal. Du Bois was not unique in employing these tactics. In his satire of the Harlem Renaissance, *Infants of the Spring* (1932), Wallace Thurman dramatized this problem through the character of an elegant African American tenor who is dogged by white audiences clamoring for "darky folksongs" despite his desire "to leave these old mammy songs alone" (110). In "Negro Artists and the Negro" (1927) Thurman urged audiences to "differentiate between sincere art and insincere art" (197). He instructed them to appreciate "the innate differences between a dialect farce" by a white author and "a dialect interpretation done by a Negro writer to express some abstract something that burns within his people and sears him" ("Negro Artists" 197-98). By using such strategies, twentieth-century African American narratives succeed in distinguishing themselves from the widespread images of blackface in American culture. Moreover, they argue against derogatory forms of modernist literary blackness such as Carl Van Vechten's *Nigger Heaven*, T. S. Eliot's blackface lyrics about "King Bolo and his Big Black Basturd Kween," and Virginia Woolf's willingness to black up in order to carry out the *Dreadnought* hoax of 1910 and, in 1911, to cause a sensation at the Post-Impressionist Ball.⁷

Matthew's medical training enables him to diagnose an American social disease and to prescribe himself a course of action intended to resist and remedy it. His treatment, dandyism, dresses a social and personal wound. Yet his dandyism is accompanied by a stark decline in health consistent with nineteenth-century conceptions of decadence and degeneration (*Dark Princess* 5). The fin de siècle's most vocal degenerationist, Max Nordau, condemned those who, like Du Bois's hero, strayed from "the moral imperative of will-power, self-restraint, hard work, and physical health" (Bernheimer 156). He singled Oscar Wilde out for attack because of "his personal eccentricities" such as "dress[ing] in queer costumes" (a behavior symptomatic of a "hysterical craving to be noticed" [Nordau 317]).⁸ Matthew's appearance betrays none of his weariness and nervous exhaustion, a fact that is consistent with his dandyism (*Dark Princess* 5) because as Ellen Moers observes in her influential study of the figure, the dandy is "a creature perfect in externals . . . a man dedicated to his own perfection through a ritual of taste" (13).

In *Dark Princess*, Du Bois situated a black dandy at the heart of his idealistic treatment of twentieth-century race relations, and succeeded in making this marginal figure—that is, the European dandy and the minstrel dandy as embodied by the black cosmopolitan dandy—redefine race theory's central idea. The modern discourse of race began in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as an epistemological inquiry into the biological differences between human beings of distinct ethnicities and varied skin colors.⁹ It led to two hundred years of pseudoscientific justifications for racial hierarchies that invariably ranked African Americans among the lowest orders. The dandy figure remapped the parameters of this centuries-old debate by forcing a shift in discourse from biology to culture.

By using the dandy's liminality to reframe the conversation about race as a matter of culture, Du Bois changed the terms of the debate by making the margins define

the center. In doing so, he levelled a field that had been artificially tilted in favor of whites. Paradoxically, it also placed the dandy, whose hallmark is marginalization, at the center of a cultural shift toward racial equality. By virtue of his dandyism, Matthew defies classification and thus escapes the pigeonholing that once hampered him. He is defined simultaneously as a hero and a coward (*Dark Princess* 101, 23), a victim and a criminal (116, 18), “a genius or God’s anointed fool” (124, 29), a man of whom his fellow African Americans can be proud, or “a beast” (212). The result is a novel that proves Baudelaire’s hypothesis that the dandy can be a hero, answering the modern problem of the color line with Wildean dandyism, which is to say “an attempt to assert the absolute modernity of Beauty” (*Picture* 107).

Matthew’s appearance generates productive uncertainties about his identity. He excites the curiosity of the Dark Princess, who wonders whether he is English, French, or Spanish. He exploits the ambiguity by signing himself as “Matthew Towns, Exile” (*Dark Princess* 17), a name that geographically and metaphorically relocates his identity beyond the color line, thereby echoing the effects of dandyism at a textual level. His aesthetic self-creation actively strikes against prejudice by transcending its location. Similarly, “elected distance . . . gives the Dandy a perspective of superiority and irony . . . and conversely allows others excluded from his private realm . . . to judge him as eccentric and extravagant” (24), as the cultural historian Sima Godfrey notes.

Matthew’s new life-theory enables him to rub shoulders with the Dark Princess’s cosmopolitan friends, all of whom oppose Western imperialism. This parallels Alain Locke’s Oxford experience of joining the Cosmopolitan Club, “a club comprised primarily of outsiders—colonial students from India, Egypt, and South Africa. . . —who seemed brought together as much by their marginality at Oxford as by their devotion to the ideal of cosmopolitanism” (Stewart 419). The Princess’s friends represent “all the darker world except the darkest” (*Dark Princess* 19)—a significant omission. They “talk art in French, literature in Italian, politics in German, and everything in clear English” (19). “The Congo . . . is flooding the Acropolis,” the Princess says during a lively conversation about modernist art. “There is a beautiful Kandinsky on exhibit, and some lovely and startling things by unknown newcomers” (20).

Yet Matthew, who admits he “would not have known whether Picasso was a man, a city, or vegetable,” remains “a stranger” in their midst (20). Unable to contribute to their high-culture kaffeeklatsch, he orbits their privileged universe but cannot enter it. His liminal position symbolizes the case of the African American modernist. He (or she) is an absent presence in modernism, an outsider excluded from the central discourses of knowledge and power, and marginalized as an “alternative” to high-brow modernism.

Du Bois’s recognition of the Africanist influence on early twentieth-century art implicitly comments on black America’s overlooked potentialities and foreshadows one of the decisive cultural encounters on which *Dark Princess* hinges. The suggestion from the Egyptian cosmopolitan that Matthew is so light he might pass (“you are not black, Mr. Towns” [19]) compels Matthew to actualize his belief in solidarity with all the darker world, including the darkest. “Black blood with us in America is a matter of spirit not simply of flesh” (19), he protests, suggesting his adherence to an antibiological, disembodied, and optative model of identity which aligns with his dandyism and the primacy it accords to culture over biology and race. When Matthew suggests to the cosmopolitans that “some of the noblest blood God ever made is dumb with chains and poverty” (23), the group begs to differ. They inform him that the black race can be precisely classed from within, according to ability and qualifications. Matthew distinctly senses “a color line within a color line, a prejudice within prejudice” (22). As the argument rises to a fevered pitch, an Egyptian blurts, “pah!” Flippantly equating race and class, he declares, “what art ever came from the

canaille!" (26). His chauvinism encapsulates the group's ethos as well as its desire to create a utopia ruled by an elite culled from the "ranks of all really superior men of all colors" (25).

It is in the face of this racist and elitist attack that Du Bois's hero strategically puts on the minstrel mask. Galled by the group's snobbery, Matthew raises his voice in song—an act of lyric resistance that successfully rebuts its elitist account of cultural value. His rage blossoms into an exuberant rendition of "Go down, Moses!," a famous African American Spiritual and a stirring example of the beauty of black folk culture. This is the "Great Song of Emancipation" (25). "When Israel was in Egypt land," Matthew sings, "let my people go! Oppressed so hard they could not stand, let my people go" (26). In the song, "Israel" signifies the African American slave while Egypt corresponds to the slavemaster. The narrative intertwines the defeat of the pre-Emancipation master with the overthrow of the modern, twentieth-century racist, represented by Du Bois's Egyptian character. Matthew's eccentric, courageous act signals a transition in the novel. It celebrates a specifically African American culture and refutes racist stereotypes of cultural inferiority. In opposition to the patrician view of art and society, Matthew gives voice to the common man and demonstrates the beauty of the low-born culture they have myopically overlooked. By placing African American song within the tradition of cosmopolitan dandyism, Matthew installs black art in the Pantheon of Culture.

Matthew's star turn rewrites cultural history from the ground up. In *Souls*, Du Bois contended that African Americans must be admitted as "co-worker[s] in the kingdom of culture" (9). "The shadow of a mighty Negro past flits through the tale . . . of Egypt and the Sphinx," Du Bois wrote in the first chapter of his seminal study of race and culture. "Throughout history, the powers of single black men flash here and there like falling stars, and die sometimes before the world has rightly gauged their brightness" (*Souls* 9). Du Bois's diction sounds inspired by Baudelaire's description of the dandy as glorious "like the declining daystar" (Baudelaire 29). Baudelaire's and Du Bois's shared investment in a rhetoric of decline gestures toward the historical dimension of dandyism: wherever he appears, the dandy strikes "the last spark of heroism" in periods of political and cultural instability (Baudelaire 28). Du Bois aligns his hero with American and European dandies, who act as harbingers of change, particularly in class dynamics. According to Baudelaire, the dandy pops up at moments of social and cultural shift, "in periods of transition when democracy is not yet all-powerful" (28). "In the disorder of these times, certain men who are socially, politically and financially ill at ease, but are all rich in native energy [*riches de force native*], may conceive the idea of establishing a new kind of aristocracy" (Baudelaire 28). Such new nobilities might be found, Baudelaire argues, among the dandies native to North America: the tribes referred to as "savage" that may "in fact be the *disjecta membra* [scattered fragments] of great extinct civilizations" (29). Preferring so-called "barbarism" to "civilisation" asserts itself as a wholly legitimate choice in this instance.¹⁰ Baudelaire's example of the neglected nobility of the Native American anticipates Du Bois's demand that black folk be recognized as a "new kind of aristocracy." In addition, Baudelaire's example dovetails with Du Bois's belief, expressed in *Souls*, that cultural prejudice against the race should not be "learnedly explain[ed] . . . as the natural defence of culture against barbarism" (12). The cosmopolitan dandyism Matthew espouses is as much African American as it is European. It is a safeguard against the barbarisms of elitism and chauvinism, the false idols the Cosmopolitan Club represents.

Du Bois put the theories of Baudelaire and Wilde into practice, testing them against twentieth-century race prejudice. Matthew enacts Wilde's principle that "with an evening coat and a white tie . . . anybody, even a stockbroker, can gain a reputation for being civilized" (*Picture* 8). This idea derives from Baudelaire's theory that the dandy is "a new species [*espèce*] of aristocracy" (28). For Matthew, as for the

dandies he emulates, prejudice is a miasma that fashion and flair, taste and talent can burn away. Like the extravagant displays of personal artifice favored by the likes of Beau Brummell and Oscar Wilde, Matthew's dandyism also challenges the natural order. By confronting the pall of racism deemed "natural" by complacent whites and blacks, Matthew's performance tests and remaps racial boundaries. Du Bois makes the substitution of clothes for character (the quality Matthew once believed could erode prejudice) a trenchant commentary on the flimsy scientific basis of racism's most cherished discourses. Matthew's use of clothing demonstrates that color prejudice is as much a cultural construction as the cut of a well-tailored suit.

The dandy assumes an oppositional position. His *raison d'être* is to challenge hegemonic conventions: in a democratic age he may espouse an aristocratic doctrine (as Baudelaire did), but at a time of rampant inequality (such as Du Bois's) his hostility may be directed toward elites. "We recognized democracy as a method of discovering real aristocracy" (*Dark Princess* 225), Matthew's ally, the Dark Princess, explains:

We looked frankly forward to raising not all the dead, sluggish, brutalized masses of men, but to discovering among them genius, gift [*sic*], and ability in far larger number than among the privileged and ruling classes. Search, weed out, encourage; educate, train, and open all doors! Democracy is not an end; it is a method of aristocracy. (225)

The dandy's purpose is to interrogate the dominant order of things. This gives his aesthetics political power and vitality. He demonstrates his courage by his insubordination. As Godfrey remarks, "he defines himself against other values rather than in terms of any specific order of values" (26).

The second part of Du Bois's novel returns Matthew to the United States. Revolted by a colleague's brutal disfiguration at the hands of the Ku Klux Klan, Matthew plots murder.¹¹ Du Bois's dandy terrorist merges the New Negro dandy and the black radical. Now, Matthew gives "up all thought of a career, of leadership, of greatly or essentially changing the world" (*Dark Princess* 126). In a country like the United States where the winner takes all, a loser cannot expect to be heralded as a hero. A man who does not work adds nothing to the labor supply. Matthew favors aesthetic *flânerie*, relishes it even, saying, "I arose and did not go to work. Instead I went down to the art gallery" (279). He rejects the American work ethic and the equation of success with capitalism. Instead, he willingly chooses failure, and not for the first time either: as stated at the beginning of this essay, Matthew's loss of faith early in the novel drives him into exile as he rejects American values. The ideology of failure he embraces clashes with the American ideology of success. But Matthew is in good company: dandyism also prizes failure and makes it a central tenet in its philosophy.¹² Matthew's choices demonstrate a close correspondence with the Wildean dandy's rejection of the logic of capitalism. In "Pen, Pencil, and Poison" (1889), Wilde reminds us that "it is only the Philistine who seeks to estimate a personality by the vulgar test of production" (108). Du Bois's surprising alignment gestures toward the possibilities that can arise from failure, a countercultural strategy that signals "the strain of failure [present] in all modernism" (Love 25). Considered in this respect, the dandy's failure, along with "failed" and "bad" art (which includes blackface minstrelsy), can be reconceived as potentially positive because they force a reassessment.

Although Matthew's terrorist attack fails, he pays for it with a heavy prison sentence of ten years' hard labor (*Dark Princess* 101). Yet this failure provides another occasion for his dandyism to assert itself, to make an artistic event out of the most tragic elements of his existence (101-02). While on trial, Matthew delivers a consummate performance, a self-conscious dandy show much like Oscar Wilde's self-dramatization from the dock at his trial in 1895. Keenly aware that his martyrdom gives him an audience, Matthew embodies Thomas Carlyle's description of dandyism

as a plea for attention. "For all this perennial Martyrdom, and Poesy, and even Prophecy, what is it that the Dandy asks in return? Solely, we may say, that you recognise his existence; . . . do but look at him, and he is contented" (207), observes Carlyle in *Sartor Resartus* (1836), a volume Du Bois read and admired (Dickerson 92). In court, Matthew reflects that music, "some slow beat like the Saul death march" (*Dark Princess* 100-01) in Handel's eponymous oratorio, would add dramatic interest to the effect created by the sun glinting off his crisply curled hair, his suit tastefully delineating his long, elegant body (101-02).

Years later, Matthew's artistic vision is fulfilled when he emerges from incarceration as a "lean, handsome, cadaverous figure" (124) serenaded by a Spiritual-singing crowd. On being released, he delivers an impromptu speech to the audience. A melodramatic account of his life that plays on the conventions of the slave narrative, he tells a "twice-told human tale that touched every one of them, that they knew by heart, that they had lived through each in its thousand variations" (123-24). His story begins with his birth in the familial log cabin in Virginia and culminates with the turning point in his life—his confrontation with the dean of medicine who refused him training. Matthew's "great, full, beautiful voice" meets the harmonizing tones of a slave song, sung by the sympathetic public that greets him at the prison exit (124). This confluence of voice and song demonstrates the synthetic coherence of Matthew's performance: his dandyism complements the redemptive power of the songs. Du Bois believed that the Spiritual the crowd sings was "the song that best expresses the revolt of the Negro slave" (*Correspondence* 1:199).¹³ Reading this moment as an instance of resistant dandyism dovetails with the song's message.

In the final section of *Dark Princess*, Du Bois reinvents the classic plantation scene made famous by minstrelsy. His strategy is to interrogate the ways in which these signifiers of the black experience are ripe for reassessment. Du Bois returns the cosmopolitan dandy to his Virginia home, sending Matthew to the South that mothered him or, as he puts it, to "that breeder of slaves and hate, Virginia" (*Dark Princess* 279). *Dark Princess's* logic requires that the novel reach its apogee—in terms of both its plot structure and its hero's self-realization—by sending the dandy back to the plantation and forcing him to recognize its inherent beauty. This resonates with and amplifies Du Bois's earliest valorizations of traditional black culture. It is, in other words, only by being "carried back to old Virginia" that Matthew can ensure the future of the race.

Du Bois's choice was not accidental. "Carry Me Back to Ole Virginny" was an extremely popular nineteenth-century burnt-cork standard that became Virginia's state song in the twentieth century. The lyrics immortalize nostalgia for the antebellum South as articulated by a free black who yearns to be carried back to "Massa and Missis" where he'll "be happy and free from all sorrow" (Cockrell 174). The idealistic lyrics imply that slavery was preferable to emancipation and buttress notions of "slave loyalty and docility" long after the Civil War (Van Deburg 113).¹⁴ The novel's plot mirrors the hero's central aesthetic strategy, thus endowing *Dark Princess* with a striking structural and thematic coherence. Earlier in the novel Matthew's dandyism and aesthetic refinement functioned to separate him intellectually and geographically from this painful history. At the end of the novel, it both refutes the old lie and remakes his home and his birthright.

"There is horror there," he warns the Princess about the state of Virginia's history (*Dark Princess* 279). The Princess responds fearlessly. "This cabin with little change in its aspect can be made a place of worship, of beauty and books. . . . And this world is really much nearer to our [cosmopolitan] world than I had thought" (278). The "crucifixion" that is Matthew's return to the South enables the cosmopolitan couple to recreate a sanctuary beyond the ruin of slavery and the slurs of minstrelsy (283). What is being crucified and symbolically laid to rest is the brutal past, the horrors of slavery and its attendant cultural forms; this is necessary so that black culture may be resurrected in a finer form in future.

"Suddenly the whole thing became symbolic," Du Bois writes of Matthew's journey to Virginia (304). In the plane flying him there, riding "above the world," Matthew feels triumphant. "The morning stars sang in the vast silence above the roar" of the machine's engine. Matthew adds his voice to their cosmic song, singing "again the Song of Emancipation—the Call of God—'Go down, Moses!'" (305). The scene is freighted with auguries of apocalypse and world renaissance ("a soft pale light grew upon the world—a halo, a radiance as of some miraculous virgin birth") (304). Back on land, Matthew continues his visionary encounter with the South. He boards a train and rides in the Jim Crow car. The sights, tastes, feelings, and sounds of the South converge upon him in an irrepressible tangle of "dreams and fears" (306). Memories of "young cotton and corn" flood him (as they do the minstrel-freeman in "Carry Me Back to Ole Virginny" when he yearns for Virginia because "there's where the cotton and corn and taters grow") (306).

Matthew wants "to cry and sing, walk and rage, scream and dance" (306). This reaction brings to life Du Bois's idea of double-consciousness as "two warring ideals in one dark body" as well as the idea of resistant minstrelsy (*Souls* 8). On his arrival home, the Princess presents Matthew with a newborn son, an infant "Messenger and Messiah to all the Darker Worlds." Matthew's mother consecrates the child, intoning "the old slave song of world revolution: 'I am seekin' for a City—for a City into de kingdom!'" while she dances (*Dark Princess* 310). And so, in *Dark Princess's* final deployment of resistant minstrelsy, Du Bois explicitly breathes new life into desecrated tropes and consecrates them to the renewal of the black aesthetic.

1. See Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford UP, 1993).

2. See among others Mónica González Caldeiro, "African American Representations on the Stage: Minstrel Performances and Hurston's Dream of a 'Real' Negro Theater," in *The Harlem Renaissance Revisited: Politics, Arts, and Letters*, Jeffrey O. G. Ogbar, ed. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2010), 7-19; Elisa F. Glick, "Harlem's Queer Dandy: African-American Modernism and the Artifice of Blackness," *Modern Fiction Studies* 49.3 (2003): 414-42; Glick, *Materializing Queer Desire*; Lemke; Marvin McAllister, *Whiting Up: Whiteface Minstrels and Stage Europeans in African American Performance* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2011); and Miller, *Slaves to Fashion*.

3. A decade on, the best book on the origins of minstrelsy remains W. T. Lhamon, Jr., *Jump Jim Crow: Lost Plays, Lyrics, and Street Prose of the First Atlantic Popular Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2003).

4. In the same vein, Locke explains that "caricature has put upon the countenance of the Negro the mask of the comic and the grotesque, whereas in deeper truth and comprehension, nature or experience have put there the stamp of the very opposite, the serious, the tragic, the wistful" (18).

5. *Dark Princess* and *Souls* complement in terms of culture what Du Bois argued with respect to history and political economy in *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860-1880* (1935) and *The Gift of Black Folk* (1924). As Lwin notes, Du Bois observed that "democracy was not plentiful grown in America. It was a slow growth beginning in Europe and developing further and more quickly in America" (qtd. in Lwin 180).

6. We can also apply the concept of ironic distancing fruitfully to Fanon's analysis of the power that comes with mastery of language (17-18). According to Fanon, the black man's double cultural burden can generate a "Manichaean delirium." In this case, ironic distancing functions as a coping strategy, a preventative measure that can defer or even stop the onset of this tragic splitting of consciousness.

7. On Eliot's racist use of minstrel dandyism, see Jonathan Gill, "Protective Coloring: Modernism and Blackface Minstrelsy in the Bolo Poems," in *T.S. Eliot's Orchestra: Critical Essays on Poetry and Music*, John Xiros Cooper, ed. (New York: Garland, 2000), 75. On Woolf, see Urmila Seshagiri, *Race and the Modernist Imagination* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2010), 146-48.

8. For a consideration of the African American investment in eugenicist scientific debates and *Dark Princess* as a "eugenic fantasy," see Daylanne K. English, *Unnatural Selections: Eugenics in American Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2004), 42.

9. Modern discourse on race owes much to several signal contributions, including the 1980s' work of Sander L. Gilman and Nancy Stepan. More recently, Siobhan Somerville, Nell Irvin Painter and Sharon Holland (to mention but a few) have contributed significantly to this critical debate. See Gilman, "Black

Notes

Bodies, White Bodies: Toward an Iconography of Female Sexuality in Late Nineteenth-Century Art, Medicine, and Literature," *Critical Inquiry* 12.1 (1985): 204-42; Gilman, *Difference and Pathology: Stereotypes of Sexuality, Race, and Madness* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1985); Gilman, *Disease and Representation: Images of Illness from Madness to AIDS* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1988); Gilman, "Sexology, Psychoanalysis, and Degeneration: From a Theory of Race to a Race to Theory," in Chamberlin and Gilman 72-96; Stepan, "Biology and Degeneration: Races and Proper Places," in Chamberlin and Gilman 97-120; Somerville, "Introduction: Queer Fictions of Race," in *Queer Fictions of Race*, Siobhan B. Somerville, ed., spec. issue of *Modern Fiction Studies* 48.4 (2002): 787-94; Somerville, *Queering the Color Line: Race and the Inventions of Homosexuality in American Culture* (Durham: Duke UP, 2000); Painter, *Creating Black Americans: African-American History and Its Meanings, 1619 to the Present* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2005); Holland, "The Last Word on Racism: New Directions for a Critical Race Theory," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 104.3 (2005): 403-23.

10. My thinking here is indebted to Matei Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism* (Durham: Duke UP, 1987), 71.

11. Du Bois's fiction gestures to the facts of Paul Robeson's life and career. The child of a slave, Robeson was a highly educated renaissance man. In the 1920s, his renditions of spirituals electrified the world. Robeson also portrayed a former Pullman porter and ex-convict in the title role of *The Emperor Jones* by Eugene O'Neill.

In a 1950 essay for *Negro Digest*, Du Bois described Robeson's 1949 Paris performance in terms that mirror Matthew Towns's story and trajectory:

It was in Paris, on Wednesday, April 20, 1949. . . . Paul Robeson entered in the whole audience rose and cheered with 2500 voices and in all human tongues. I doubt if any other person on earth could have elicited such spontaneous tribute. It was a many-sided outburst to a magnificent voice; to a recent visitor in every country of Europe. . . ; to a son of black slaves, a co-worker not with wealthy and titled snobs but with laborers of all climes and colors. We had men of stature and renown at that gathering . . . [including] Picasso. . . ; [none] received so tumultuous a tribute. . . . [Robeson's] great voice rose in song. . . . The applause swept up to the skies. That was what happened. (*Oxford Reader* 282)

Note how the passage above provides the novel with palpable narrative and stylistic echoes, particularly in the last quarter, "The Maharajah of Bwodpur," in which Towns gives up his elitist pretensions to work in the American South as a co-worker in the world's kingdom of culture. There, he is met by his spiritual-singing mother (Du Bois, *Dark Princess* 304-10).

12. Queerness is not a fully articulated theme in *Dark Princess* and this essay therefore does not address it. Although a queer politics is often connected to dandyism, the two concepts should not be mistaken as synonymous or inherently intertwined, particularly when historically considered. Rather, they need to be recognized as making shared (but not identical) investments. For example, Halberstam suggests that failure is capitalism's antithesis and she binds this to queerness in order to suggest that "the queer art of failure . . . quietly loses, and in losing it imagines other goals for life, for love, for art, and for being" (88). Similarly, in *Materializing Queer Desire*, Glick's excellent reading of black dandyism as "a badge of openly queer desire and anti-bourgeois politics during the Harlem Renaissance" (83) suggests one of the productive ways of reading dandyism and anticapitalism.

13. The song is "Before I'd be a slave I'd be buried in a grave and go home to my God and be free!"

14. This sentiment is echoed in other minstrel songs such as "I long to see old massa's face again."

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