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The Sounds of Black Laughter and the Harlem Renaissance: Claude McKay, Sterling Brown, Langston Hughes

Dream-singers,
Story-tellers,
Dancers,
Loud laughers in the hands of Fate—
My people.
—Langston Hughes, "Laughers"

W. E. B. DuBois, Zora Neale Hurston, Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin, and Toni Morrison have all been widely recognized as "noisy" authors who "sound" black culture, producing "speakerly" prose or incorporating black music into their work.[1] But black poets such as Claude McKay, Sterling Brown, and Langston Hughes can be just as noisy. Their poems are full of hushes, whispers, sighs, songs, tongues, throats, wails, moans, voices, speech, music, hymns, blues, sobs, cries, lashes, yowls, jazz, scatting, drums, thunder, drones, shouts, trumpets, trains, whistles, choirs, horns, and all sorts of other "raucous sound," as McKay puts it in "Song of New York" (1926).[2] Brown's list of synonyms for sound includes "the master, / . . . the time-keeper, the warden, the straw-boss, the brass-hat, / The top-hat, the big shot, the huge noise, the power,"[3] an indication that these poets were tuned in to the acoustics of power relationships and the power relationships of acoustics that constitute what Jonathan Sterne has called the "new sonic regime" of modernity.[4] They knew well, as Jacques Attali confirms, that the "appropriation and control [of noise] is a reflection of power . . . it is essentially political. . . . In noise can be read the codes of life, the relations among men."[5]

American Literature, Volume 80, Number 1, March 2008
DOI 10.1215/00029831-2007-062 © 2008 by Duke University Press

Recent work in sound studies has tended to focus on technological innovation (telephone, gramophone, radio, film, and other broadcast or recording devices) or, as in Attali's study, on musical aspects of sound culture.[6] My essay, however, attends to the organic or bodily acoustics of African American laughter—specifically, in the sonic landscape of the United States in the first three decades of the twentieth century, especially as it is configured in the poetry of McKay, Brown, and Hughes. These poets variously build on, and take part in, a long tradition of African American humor, music, and song; their work thus accords a privileged place for the many and varied sounds of laughter in black America. It is not my intention to trace these varied sounds here, nor is there space to describe, as Mel Watkins does in his book-length study, the many ways in which those sounds have reverberated throughout African American acoustic and literary traditions.[7] Rather, I want to focus on how one type of laughter is registered in these poets' work—what Helene Johnson praised in "Sonnet to a Negro in Harlem" (1927) as an "arrogant and bold" laugh that Joyce Hertzler subsequently described as "increasingly militant, aggressive, accusatory"[8]—and to suggest how this laugh emerged in an "increasingly 'sound-conscious'" modern era.[9] Black laughter not only challenged the acoustics of white power and served as a weapon in the struggle for political and social justice, but it also aggressively and bodily sounded what Houston Baker calls the strength of "an African ancestral past" (*MHR*, 56). As McKay, Brown, and Hughes understood, the noise of a combative rather than humorous, comedic, or funny black laugh could go where the physical black body in many cases could not and thus could uniquely challenge white control of public space while also mapping or territorializing that space as a field for further political action.[10]

Tracing the emergence of this new laugh—and documenting the risible history in which it occurs—is a necessarily incomplete and imperfect endeavor. The textual record can offer only an interpretive trace of the originary acoustic phenomenon, transforming the temporal and historic bodily noise into an ongoing literary and rhetorical event and further troping the "break" that Fred Moten describes, in part, as the "beautiful distance between sound and the writing of sound."[11] Nevertheless, the change in laughter in the literary and historical soundscape can seem startlingly sudden at points, as in the poems of Claude McKay, for example. McKay's poetry from the 1920s

and 1930s is full of laughter of various types, but the way in which it functions in his 1922 *Harlem Shadows* is a world away from the way it sounds in the nineteen-poem sequence "Cities" that he produced around 1934 after returning from a decade-long exile from the United States (1923–33). Certainly McKay had changed during these years, and those changes no doubt affected the world he addressed in his poems, but it is also the case, I would like to argue, that the state of black laughter in the United States had changed during his time abroad. McKay's poems take note of, and reflect, those changes.

In *Harlem Shadows*, laughter occurs in the context of McKay's Jamaican childhood, replete with nostalgia for the tropical weather and landscape, childish innocence, and island culture. "O sweet are tropic lands for waking dreams!" he writes in "North and South": "There time and life move lazily along. / . . . crickets chirp. . . . / lizards loll. . . . / And swarthy children in the fields at play, / Look upward laughing at the smiling skies" (*CP*, 159). This is the general role of laughter in "After the Winter," "My Mother," "I Shall Return," "Morning Joy," "Spring in New Hampshire," and "Dreams" as well as in "The Desolate City" (1923), which longs for "a time, when, happy with the birds, / The little children clapped their hands and laughed" (*CP*, 205). All of these poems can be read as poems about New York, of course, which is everything the tropics and "dreams" in the poem's Caribbean "South" are not; up North, the children's "laugh is swallowed in the deafening roar / Of captive wind [in the New York subways] that moans for fields and seas."[12]

By 1934, however, McKay's sense of laughter had changed radically; it was modern, social, classed, colored, and urban—a contemporary sound heard on the streets of the various "Cities" of his sequence's title. In "Barcelona," McKay—at this time on the FBI lookout list as a revolutionary to be kept out of the United States—depicts a sort of proletarian carnival in which control of public space and sound go hand in hand: "The workers join and block the city's ways, / Ripe laughter ringing from intriguing lips" (*CP*, 224). In "Tetuan" and "Fez," laughter springs from the matrix of "Moslem pride" (*CP*, 227) and "beauty African in shape and form" (*CP*, 226). In "Moscow," where "I heard and saw / The human voice and presence of Lenin," he describes "colors laughing richly their delight, / And reigning over all the color Red" (*CP*, 229). And his three-part poem "Harlem," one of five poems that conclude the sequence by bringing the revolutionary spirit to the

United States, wonders (à la Countee Cullen) how oppressed African Americans can "consent to joy and mirth" instead of revolt.[13] He concludes that "The gifts divine are theirs, music and laughter, / All other things, however great, come after" (*CP*, 237). Over a period of ten years, laughter has gone from being the stuff of childhood to serving and signifying revolution—linking Europe, Africa, and the United States in a sort of black Atlantic of laughter.

While these poems register a definite change in the cadence of black laughter during the period of the Harlem Renaissance, the work of Sterling Brown and Langston Hughes appears to analyze, engage, and deploy that laughter in different and more sustained ways, which is perhaps not surprising given their continuous residence and activity in the United States during the time that McKay was abroad. In order to better understand the rhetorical, social, and cultural significance of this new "arrogant and bold" black laugh, we must first address a number of questions: From where did this laughter come? What was its new content? What made it specifically modern in character? How was it being variously heard? And we must recognize the extent to which race relations in the United States have been conducted via African American laughter in substantial, ongoing ways since that laughter's emergence on 1 January 1863.[14]

"The Different Signs and Sounds That Dominate"

It is indeed tempting to begin a history of African American laughter with the Emancipation Proclamation—a date celebrated with "whooping and laughing" on the part of freed slaves.[15] Toni Morrison imagines a similar correspondence of freedom and laughter in *Beloved*, where Baby Suggs expresses her feeling of being free for the first time by exclaiming: "'These hands belong to me. These *my* hands'" and by laughing "out loud" so much that she has to "[cover] her mouth to keep from laughing too loud."[16] Until this freedom, Mark Smith argues, the conditions of slavery and its extremely close regulation of slave noises would have made it impossible for the black laugh to be heard in any substantial expressive or public way, as the social order of the Southern soundscape was purchased by the enforced silence or careful supervision of slave noise—music, work, eating, conversation, religion, and other noises of daily life. "Evidence suggests," Smith writes, "that some white southerners racialized the acoustic and con-

structed blacks as innately noisy, especially sensitive to the acoustemological environment" and thus in need of constant acoustic discipline and management (*LNA*, 68) to produce what Baker has called "reassuring *sounds* from the black quarters" signifying that "there can be no worry that the Negro is getting 'out of hand'" (*MHR*, 30–31).

If there was a public black laughter in the antebellum South—a time more readily characterized by Aunt Hester's scream than her laugh—it was less expressive of black experience than demanded by, and performed explicitly for, plantation owners and like representatives of white authority, as Gunnar Myrdal suggested in 1944: "The loud high-pitched cackle that is commonly considered as the 'Negro laugh'" was "a means of appeasing the master by debasing oneself before him and making him think that one was contented."[17] Indeed, Smith writes, for the black slave, "the ability to control sound and silence could mean freedom," for "survival and escape were contingent on an acute appreciation of the southern plantation soundscape" (*LNA*, 76). Such an appreciation necessarily included the semiotics of laughter. A letter in Frederick Douglass's the *North Star* reported in 1848, for example, that in a case of runaway slaves in Kentucky, "Planter Moss, one of the colored defendants, was accessory to the escape of the slaves, because he laughed!"[18] Increasing freedoms in 1863 changed that appreciation along with the soundscape of the South for good so that "Freedpeople gauged their freedom by testing previously forbidden aural worlds and quashing sounds of old. They were free now to shout with louder voice and free enough never to have to hear the sounds of slavery again" (*LNA*, 239). Smith's study makes no mention of black laughter in the antebellum South—charged as laughter was with the expression of freedom—but the changed soundscape after the Civil War moved at least one Northern white listener to write: "These negroes are the most inordinate guffawers I have ever heard of. They are laughing, yelling and singing from morning until night. They have no care on their minds."[19]

What this listener wants to hear as an expression of a childish or carefree "negro" lifestyle and racial profile may very well have been a response to anxieties about the freed slaves' claim to a share of the public soundscape. This reaction may also have been a particularly Northern response, from ears that were expecting to hear, and thus did hear, black laughter as it was constructed and heard in blackface minstrel performances across the North. For black laughter in the

North was not without contest either, if not from continuing political and social inequality then from blackface performances that not only defined African American people as objects of white laughter and ridicule—in the process making the black individual into what Jessie Fauset called "the 'funny man' of America" and the American stage—but that also sought to codify the noise of black laughter and circumscribe what and how it might mean.[20] Like Smith's history, Eric Lott's *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* doesn't discuss laughter at any great length, but it becomes clear through Lott's discussion that the black body is being defined *especially* by the laughter it makes. James Fenimore Cooper, Lott explains, for example, felt that blackface performances conjured up "[n]ine-tenths of the blacks of [New York City] . . . beating banjoes, singing African songs, drinking, and worst of all, laughing in a way that seemed to set their very hearts rattling within their ribs."[21] A newspaper reporter of the time felt similarly, describing one performance as "the best representative of our American negro that we ever saw. . . . Such a natural gait!—*such* a laugh!—and such a twitching-up of the arm and shoulder! It was THE negro, par excellence."[22] Both Cooper and this reporter suggest the singular importance of black laughter in defining the "American negro" for white audiences; indeed, the reporter tries valiantly to convey this characteristic to his audience via the "twitching" dashes, italics, exclamation marks, and capital letters of his elaborate description—a sort of secondary, grammatical, or literary blackface performance that's going on while the writer experiments with the speakerly experience of black noise within the otherwise protective architecture of a white scriptural economy, publishing apparatus, and even a white diction ("par excellence") that collaborate to keep the black noise from getting out of hand.

For Lott, the "cultural mixing" of blackface performances occurred aurally as well as visually or on the page—happening "*en l'air*," he writes, as "[t]he white man is 'arrested' and 'struck' by a voice only," making the performances provocative for that very reason (*LT*, 56, 57). White anxiety, he explains, managed to compensate for white interest in the interracial and sexually threatening occasions when African American "songs are in the mouths and ears of all"[23] by infantilizing black noise and effectively "arresting 'black' people in the early stages of childhood development" (*LT*, 143). Again, Lott does not suggest the singular importance of laughter in this process, but

a look at purportedly scientific studies of laughter from the turn of the century suggests that the desire to infantilize and emasculate the black laugh was more than just a reaction to minstrel performance; Lott's remarks about white construction of black noise help us understand the extent to which the rhetoric of these writers is symptomatic of white anxieties about an increasingly aggressive black laughter "in the streets," as it were, as well as on the stage.

Well into the twentieth century, scholars and laughter "theorists" took great pains to show either that black laughter was different from white laughter by virtue of its childishness and innocence or that laughter itself had behavioral or physiological roots in Africa and was thus a primitive, immature, or uncivilized element in the Western world. An article in the *Christian Recorder* in 1876, for example, concluded: "It should verily seem that laughing is a national characteristic. . . . This is especially consoling to colored people, many of whom had concluded that being descendents of the 'light hearted children of the Tropics,' they laughed by rule."[24] Nearly sixty years later, Carl Jung, seeking "the psychology of the average American" and asking why "America as a nation can laugh" so well, landed upon the same idea: "[T]he Negro, with his primitive motility, his expressive emotionality, his childlike immediacy . . . has infected American behavior." As Jung explains, "[E]very psychologist and every doctor knows [that] nothing is more contagious than . . . signs of emotion—particularly laughing and peculiarities of speech."[25] Two years earlier, in 1928, Martin Armstrong's philosophical inquiry concluded that laughter is "a throw-back to the jungle, an irruption of the primitive and bestial through the rational and civilized."[26] In the same year, social scientist C. W. Kimmins argued, via his case studies, that "[t]he laughter of the coloured child is a matter of pure enjoyment, and retains all the characters of the hearty uncontrolled laughter of the white child *in the infants' department of the school.*"[27]

Journalistic accounts suggest a similar—if somewhat desperate—recourse to the rhetoric of childish or primitive minstrel laughter in order to account for the threat of new black noise that, by its very public sounding, was beginning to diminish the whiteness of public space beyond the scripted and more easily managed acoustics of page and stage. One Northern newspaper writer, identified as a "correspondent of the Cincinnati *Times*," offered the following description of the response he received from an African American hog farmer in Ala-

bama, when asked about the horn he was blowing. “Ebony opened his wide mouth,” writes the reporter, “displaying at the same time as fine a set of white teeth as I ever looked at, and laughed as loudly as he could, and then said: ‘Massa, you’se bein’ from the Norf, where none of these things is gwine on.’ ”[28] The farmer’s laugh precedes speech in becoming the first site of exchange between the two men; the reporter is “ ‘arrested’ and ‘struck,’ ” as in Lott’s formulation, by a laugh inflected not only with racial but also with geographic and occupational content as well. But the moment of racially problematic insolence that emerges—as the black man’s laugh is directed at the reporter’s ignorance—is managed and made possible by the minstrel form the reporter sees the farmer performing: the hog herder’s physical traits, line of work, regional identification, and, most of all, the grotesque laughter of blackface performances. That cultural form makes it almost impossible for the reporter to hear the farmer’s behavior as anything other than naive or childish, excusing the potential challenge to white superiority and preserving his own standing in the social order. At the same time, of course, the farmer’s laugh is tactical; he can laugh in safety at the reporter only because he is able to anticipate the minstrel form that the white reporter expects. In thus demonstrating the “mastery of [minstrel] form” that Baker describes as constitutive of African American modernism when twinned with the “deformation of mastery,” the double-voiced farmer’s laugh anticipates some of the laughing we later hear in McKay, Hughes, and Brown.[29]

To the *Cincinnati Times* reporter, the black hog farmer sounds like the “darkey” of the nineteenth-century stage because he looks the part; appearance, geography, occupation, and laugh are synchronous in the construction and performance of race. An article in the *Christian Recorder* in 1878 suggests the singular importance of laughter in this process:

> A colored gentleman dressed in an immaculate white shirt, brilliant sky blue pantaloons and a thimble belt full of animunition [*sic*], bearing a Colt’s six shooter, army pattern, began laughing most immoderately in the mist [*sic*] of the sermon [after overhearing a joke discretely exchanged between two women]. At last he got up and went to the front door, still laughing. At the door he began dancing in full view of the congregation. He at last calmed down, and returning, resumed his seat. The minister said to him, ‘I am very much obliged to you, sir, for going out and remaining out until your

laughing fit was over.' To which he replied, 'You're welcome, sir.' This gentleman was colored and the minister white.[30]

If the hog farmer looked and sounded like the person the reporter expected to see and hear, this well-dressed "gentleman" does not. His "immaculate" dress, his position in the military and public possession of a weapon, his formal speech and cultivated bearing, his respect for the church, and his fine rapport with the preacher who calls him "sir" are not synchronous with minstrel performance; moreover, the extra, emphatic reminder of his racial identity in the final line of the passage suggests that his outward trappings, demeanor, and public reception are otherwise coded white—a judgment metonymically suggested by the white shirt he is wearing. In depicting the man's laughter (which leads to his dance) as sudden, uncontrollable, and irrational, the anecdote wants to demonstrate that while you can take the "darkey" out of the South and even off the stage, you can't take out his laughter; it breaks through an otherwise convincing performance of whiteness and offers proof—the proof that Jung, Armstrong, and Kimmins wanted to marshal—that white and black are essentially different when it comes to the ways in which each race laughs.

I've gone to such lengths to describe the amount of interdisciplinary and rhetorical noise being made about black laughter because I believe its correspondence with the latter half of the Harlem Renaissance—when McKay, Brown, Hughes, and others were also writing extensively about laughter—is not coincidental. Rather, these examples indicate the anxiety that was motivating white America to manage the increasingly public sounds of black laughter and that the constant supervision of, and rhetorical attention to, this noise was perceived as crucial for the maintenance of white superiority. It's not surprising, given the amount of attention paid in public and in print to the dynamics of this laughing, that black laughers and black writers and thinkers should likewise seize upon their laughter's acoustics—"[t]he different signs and sounds that dominate"—as a crucial and complicated endeavor in the articulation of modern black culture and the ongoing struggle for equal rights and political and social justice during the 1920s and 1930s.[31] Increasingly, the larger culture would hear a new, modern black laugh—what Richard Wright in 1937 would call "deep-cellared laughs meant for everybody"[32]—as a type of noise that traditionally signaled social stability and order (Baker's "reassuring sounds from the black quarters") but which, in signifyin(g) on or

deforming that convention, was taking on new overtones in which one could hear the makings of an acoustic revolt.

The "Lashing Force" of Sterling Brown and Langston Hughes

Poems full of "raucous sound" participate in the same noisy project as laughter, yoking the literary and acoustic in order to give "an earful for yo," as Sterling Brown writes in "Side by Side" (*CPSB*, 212).[33] Brown's poetry is noisy—so noisy, in fact, that sound pervades other senses as well, so that a person in "Mr. Danny" "[s]mells as loud as a stableyard" (*CPSB*, 177); and beauty, in "Children's Children," has a "quiet voice" (*CPSB*, 94). Brown's sense of hearing is so nuanced that it borrows from the other senses to make even finer distinctions, so that a juke joint in "New Steps" broadcasts "jazz an' scarlet noise" (*CPSB*, 83). While the synesthesia indicates the significance of sound in all facets of the world in Brown's poetry, there is no mistake that this sound is social and racially inflected and that black bodies making sounds are identified by white culture through the type of noise they produce. In the tall-tale ballad "Slim Greer," for example, a black man managing to pass as white in Arkansas is racially "outed" as a "[n]igger" when he sits down to play a piano and starts "a-tinklin' / Some mo'nful blues." The "cracker" who discovers him explains that "'No white man / Could play like that . . .'" (*CPSB*, 78). Similarly, in the minstrel show that Roberta Lee, granddaughter of Robert E. Lee, watches with nostalgia in the poem with her name as its title, the performer's physical antics are accompanied by noises from the band; the "*zip, boom*" every time he slips and falls sounds the history of blackface performance in its echo of "Zip Coon," the stock character of the minstrel stage who is not named in the poem but whom we nonetheless hear in Brown's acoustic economy (*CPSB*, 160).

Brown's poems, however, continually work with a set of especially modern noises, including a newly inflected black laugh, to disrupt the "reassuring sounds" of the nineteenth century's acoustic landscape that had come to comfortably define the black body and its social position for white listeners such as Roberta Lee and the "cracker" from "Slim Greer."[34] "Cloteel," in Brown's 1932 collection *Southern Road* (which contains "Slim Greer" and "Roberta Lee" as well), situates the sounds of laughter not as a sign of humor or comedy but as a series of public, bodily noises competing in the modern soundscape

and making themselves heard inside willfully "curtained off rooms, behind the latticed windows":

> Only now and again, across the jangling
> The loud strut cries, the jets of laughter,
> High pitched quarreling, the drunken yells
> The klaxons and the sirens, the grinding of
> trucks
>
> The clatter of rickety wagons,
> Over and beyond the whistles blasting
> noon (*CPSB*, 215)

Emily Thompson argues that "the sound world circa 1930 had little in common with that of 1900," as an injection of street traffic, construction, radio, loudspeakers, harbor traffic, airplanes, music, and other noises put issues of "noise reform" on the social agenda in New York City and resulted in the formation of New York's "Noise Abatement Commission" in 1929.[35] While the soundscape in "Cloteel" isn't exactly the New York City of Thompson's focus, the noise of traffic and the modern workday do situate this poem acoustically in the world of her description, and the two stanzas rely on a range of grammatical and syntactical ambiguities to suggest the difficulties of navigating that new soundscape. No comma after "jangling" suggests that the word could modify a noun, but no such noun follows; the verb of the sentence appears to be "cries," but "cries" could also be used as a noun, such as "jets" in the same line or "yells" in the following one; the subject of the sentence might be singular, or it might be compound; and no period signals the poem's end.

At the same time that it suggests these difficulties, this passage also modernizes black noise, its various grammatical ambiguities troping what happens when African American and mechanical sounds interpenetrate not in the context of a fantastic South or "primitive" African past but in the modern world. The resulting acoustics echo but also assert the greater extent of black agency in the black-white "cultural mixing" that, in Lott's figuration of minstrelsy discussed earlier, "usually takes place, as it were, *en l'air*." At a first hearing, the noise of a specifically black human body—the "jet" black laughter, and "pitched" black quarrels—stands in apparent contrast to the sounds of modern technology, right down to the pedestrian foot traffic's "loud strut" set in counterpoint to the street traffic of trucks, wagons, and

automobiles; Brown's catalog of noises appears to divide into human and mechanical halves that oppose black sounds to mechanical ones. However, the twinned mechanical and bodily connotations of the words "strut," "jets," and "pitched" emphatically indicate that the opposite is, in fact, the case—that black laughter and other black noises belong to and signify the modern world just as strongly as sirens and whistles do. By 1932, *The Oxford English Dictionary* records, the now familiar use of "strut" as black vernacular slang to describe a manner of walking, dancing, or performing (to "strut one's stuff") had entered print, not coincidentally through the writing of Carl Van Vechten in 1926. "Strut" was also used for its structural meanings, however, not only to mean a wooden support or brace but to refer to the physics of spokes and wheels on wagons or automobiles. Similarly, while "jet" had yet to be linked to air travel, it was being used in the late 1920s, the *OED* reports, in *Motor Car World* in reference to the mechanics of automobile engines, while also retaining its more familiar meaning: the "sudden darting movement" describing steam or water that we still recognize. Likewise, the word "pitch" has architectural as well as sonic and chromatic meanings: it can be used to describe an object's slope or angle of inclination, a quality of sound, or blackness. In the remarkable tripling of mechanical, bodily, and racial content in the words "strut," "jets," and "pitched," then, "Cloteel" forces the sort of semantic and acoustic integration on the page that the noise of black laughter did in the public soundscape: one "struts" as loudly as an automobile, and black laughter "jets" from the body as fluids do in the internal combustion engine—each as modern as the technology it invokes and a far cry from the childish or primitive black laughter that white America was used to hearing and hearing about. As "Cloteel" demonstrates, this public act of "cultural mixing" in one's walk and laugh has implications for how and whether modern America can live and listen privately as the signs of blackness invade, rather than capitulate to, "[t]he curtained off rooms" of sequestered life.

Whatever else the syntactic and grammatical ambiguities of "Cloteel" may do to figure the difficult acoustics of the modern world by limiting or expanding the sense of the passage quoted above, they ultimately have the effect of bringing those stanzas' less slippery prepositional phrases—"across the jangling" and "[o]ver and beyond"—to the poem's fore. As subject(s), verb(s), object(s), and semantics become more fluid, ambiguous, or indeterminate, the poem's prepositions become increasingly prominent, anchoring our reading and ensuring

that what gets recorded in the final tally is the spatiality of sound—the public act of acoustic transgression, crossing, and mixing characteristic of the modern, technological soundscape that Thompson describes and also of the black laugh. Another of Brown's Slim Greer poems, "Slim in Atlanta," builds even more specifically on similar concerns of public acoustics and power as they relate to the mixing of laughter and technology and the Jim Crow South:

Down in Atlanta,
  De whitefolks got laws
For to keep all de niggers
  From laughin' outdoors.

Hope to Gawd I may die
  If I ain't speakin' truth
Make de niggers do deir laughin'
  In a telefoam booth. (*CPSB*, 81)

"Slim in Atlanta" is Brown's riff on the popular "laughing barrel" tale in which black characters were required to stick their heads into FOR COLORED ONLY barrels, not into telephone booths, if they were to laugh in public—a regulation, explains Ralph Ellison, "providing whites a means of saving face before the confounding, persistent, and embarrassing mystery of black laughter."[36] As in "Cloteel," Brown's modern retrofitting of the traditional tale forces another conjunction of bodily black noise and modern white technology, and while we can't say that Slim comes out on top in the end, the effects of black noise nevertheless exact a particular price on whiteness in the process. In the first three stanzas, the poem emphasizes its concern with laughter in public ("outdoors" and "on de street"). But what seems particularly ridiculous about the lengths to which Jim Crow discipline will go in this "tall tale" is not its restriction of laughter (which, as we've seen, was a permanent part of black-white relations, not just in the tale Brown updates) but the peculiar mediation of that laughter through the new, modern, and public monument of the "telefoam booth." With its glass walls acting as a prophylactic against black laughter, the telephone booth nonetheless rendered its user publicly visible in a sort of Jim Crow panopticon seeking to render (in both senses of the term) the black body and its noises not phonetically, as it were, but telephonetically.[37]

As Slim Greer spends four hours busting a gut in one of these booths

before the state takes him away, Brown's poem intervenes in a number of ways to subvert this telephonetic architecture, relying again on the disruptive modernity of black noise to do so. Most obviously, perhaps, "Slim in Atlanta" is funny, encouraging in its readers the very behavior—the "holler" and "whoopin'" it elsewhere mentions (*CPSB*, 82)—so apparently disconcerting to white power. Brown's poem thus plays to the tactical strengths of African American culture, constructing a noisy literary community within the already noisy black world heard by Mary Ross, a *New York Times* reporter writing about Harlem in 1925: "Harlem is the proud capital of [the black] race—something entirely new on the face of the earth—a modern negro metropolis, a city of movement, gayety and color, singing, dancing, boisterous laughter and loud talk."[38] In Ross's description of the modern black city, the absence of modern, technological noise is noteworthy. Despite the horns, sirens, trucks, cars, wagons, and whistles of "Cloteel," the modern black community is still, for Ross, particularly defined by the bodily noises it makes—what Baker calls the "mnemonic *sounds* . . . so defining of 'the Negro' in American life that they were inescapable if one was earnestly to address 'the Negro question'" (*MHR*, 41).

"Slim in Atlanta" starts with, then gains its strength from "deforming," the mnemonic sounds of black dialect and black laughter; the acoustic "cultural mixing" that Lott describes, however, ultimately doesn't happen "*en l'air*" so much as *sur la page*. The most important example of this aggressive scriptural-acoustic mixing occurs in the word "telephone," which "Slim in Atlanta" registers as "telefoam," a wonderfully complex moment in which the black vernacular disrupts the signification of a modern white English exactly at the word "phone"—the very word referring to sound in general and the elementary sounds of language in particular. In a poem about how black sounds are suppressed by that "phone," then, Brown's speakerly text uses the black sound "foam" to challenge white signification at its most basic structural level, deforming the silent, readerly, or scriptural *ph* of "phone," with the more phonically reasonable *f*. As "[d]e state" has Slim taken away at the end of the poem, the narrator concludes: "Den, things was as usural / In Atlanta, Gee A." Again, Brown strategically interrupts the "usual" sounds of white public speech and white poetry with "usural" black vernacular so that things aren't "as usual" in the exercise of state power. Moreover, the (mis)spelling of the state's abbreviation as "Gee A" interrupts the purely scriptural

sign "Ga." in favor of a more speakerly or black version in a further acoustilinguistic deformation of the state of Georgia and white language. The language of the poem's conclusion, then, not only testifies to the irrepressible character of black noise but also to its continual and ongoing reverberation throughout modern America even as the bodily source of that noise is being disappeared.[39]

In Brown's poetry, the sounds of black laughter are intricately linked to black language use and the noises of modern life in engaging and confronting white control of discursive, spatial, and acoustic publics. For Langston Hughes, whose work in *The Weary Blues* (1926) and *Fine Clothes to the Jew* (1927) is as full of laughter as Brown's *Southern Road*, the sound of the modern black laugh is less technological; when it emerges, it is an elemental part of the black community, a sheer acoustic event that can be unleashed like a force of nature to the peril of those in its path.[40] Much of the laughter in Hughes's first two collections develops the tradition of educating white readers about why African Americans have to laugh—a tradition that earlier generations would have encountered in Paul Laurence Dunbar's famous description of the "the mask that grins and lies":

It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes,—
This debt we pay to human guile;
With torn and bleeding hearts we smile,
And mouth with myriad subtleties.[41]

Dunbar's phrase "myriad subtleties"—which anticipates the "myriad sounds" that Baker says the African American community must "engage . . . in order to achieve a vocabulary of *national* possibilities"—is an informative acoustic moment in this stanza (*MHR*, 71). Not only is "myriad" the first variation in the poem's iambic tetrameter, but it also stands out as polysyllabic in a meter predominantly established with monosyllabic words. By complicating or interrupting the verse form while discussing the nuances of African American speech, "We Wear the Mask" begs us to pay further attention to the exact nature of those *mouthed* "subtleties" and encourages us to listen to, rather than solely read, what the poem is saying.

If we listen to what Garrett Stewart would call the poem's "echonomics," we can begin to hear past Dunbar's mask of formal, scriptural English and understand the poem's performance as a much more complicated set of "sound effects" and "sound defects."[42] Stewart

encourages us to read "phonemically" (*RV*, 22) for the moments when "voiced"—or, in this context, speakerly—language produces "surplus" meaning as the "leak of acoustic matter" seeps across the boundaries of word divisions set up and maintained by the printed page's scriptural economy (*RV*, 16, 27). (When voiced, for example, "sound effects" sonically drifts toward "sound *de*fects" in an acoustic event that the technology of the page fails to manage.) Reading Dunbar's poem this way, we begin to hear unexpected, almost subterranean, sounds beneath the facade of traditional Anglo-American literary form and "white" language use. In line two, for example, as the word *sour* emerges twice between "hide*s our*" and "shade*s our*," we also hear an editorial voice in "shades ou*r eyes*" describe the purchase of a "masked" public voice as a *sour rise*; in line three, we hear *weep-ing* in "This debt *we p*ay"; in the *bleeding arts* of line three's "bleeding hearts," we hear the punishment of a Christian *thorn* in "Wi*th torn*"; and so on. My point in attending to the metrical variations and phonotext of this poem is to suggest that we can listen past the performance of "We Wear the Mask" for the "myriad subtleties" of its double-voiced character. Like black laughter in the nineteenth century, Dunbar cannot safely confront the reader aggressively (these aren't Wright's "deep-cellared laughs meant for everybody"). Dunbar exercises, instead, extreme care and caution so that what is read by one audience isn't the same message potentially heard by another.

When Hughes picks up the subject of laughter in the mid-1920s, he is better able than Dunbar to articulate the lesson about African American pain and laughter in more open and authentic sounds of black literary forms and speech patterns. "Homesick Blues," for example, concludes: "To keep from cryin' / I opens ma mouth an' laughs."[43] While Dunbar's question in "We Wear the Mask"—"Why should the world be over-wise, / In counting all our tears and sighs?"—is wistful and directed at most to "O great Christ," the three questions in Hughes's "Minstrel Man" are aggressive and social, impatient that the white reader hearing the same lesson for a generation still doesn't seem to get it:

Because my mouth
Is wide with laughter,
You do not hear
My inner cry?
Because my feet

Are gay with dancing,
You do not know
I die? (*CPLH*, 61)

In the end, though, both “We Wear the Mask” and “Minstrel Man” play it relatively safe, as neither overtly places blame or directs the laughter outward at an oppressor or aggressively and boldly into a public space; their critiques of the white power structure are comparatively veiled, and one can read these poems, as some people have, as general commentaries on the human condition rather than sorties in an ongoing struggle for social and political justice.

There is another side to laughter in Hughes’s poetry, though, one that characterizes black laughter as an elemental force connected to black power. In “I, Too,” for example, the “darker brother” is sent to the kitchen to eat. “But I laugh,” the speaker explains, “And eat well, / And grow strong” (*CPLH*, 46). The connection between laughter and strength is (con)sequential; eating builds a strong body, and laughter builds a strong spirit or resolve. On this level, “I, Too” and Brown’s poem “Strong Men” are part of the same discourse, as Brown writes of black oppressors who “*heard the laugh and wondered*; / *Uncomfortable*, / *Unadmitting a deeper terror*. . . .” and then uses the poem’s refrain about black resolve to explain the discomfort: “The strong men keep a-comin’ on / Gittin’ stronger . . .” (*CPSB*, 56). The poem that I’d like to emphasize in this regard, however, is Hughes’s “Railroad Avenue,” first published in the short-lived magazine of experimental black writing *FIRE!!* in 1926, then in *Fine Clothes to the Jew* a year later. Every bit as perplexing as Brown’s “Cloteel,” “Railroad Avenue” takes place at dusk in a landscape of “fish joints” and “pool rooms” and an abandoned boxcar that “some train / Has forgotten / In the middle of the / Block.” Then, halfway through the poem:

Laughter
Suddenly
Like a taut drum.
Laughter
Suddenly
Neither truth nor lie.
Laughter
Hardening the dusk dark evening.
Laughter . . . (*CPLH*, 84)

The only thing moving on "Railroad Avenue," this laughter is disembodied, a pure acoustic force ("Neither truth nor lie") loosed on the town with something of the rhythm and repetition characteristic of the blues but seemingly without source or object. Public, tense, sudden, signifying itself, it is not involved in concealing emotions or escaping hardship but is a total presence—a risible form of what V. N. Volosinov describes as "[t]he animal cry, the pure response to pain in the organism . . . bereft of accent; it is a purely natural phenomenon. For such a cry, the social atmosphere is irrelevant, and therefore it does not contain even the germ of sign formation."[44]

Unlike Volosinov's "animal cry," though, the semantics of "Railroad Avenue" and the social inflections of laughter from the time period suggest that the poem's social atmosphere is, in fact, far from irrelevant and that this laugh is a transformative black laugh, its acoustics changing the very landscape it moves across, like a thunderstorm. Just as the prepositions in "Cloteel" come to the fore in the wake of that poem's various ambiguities, the unanswered questions that "Railroad Avenue" raises—Where is the laughter coming from? At whom is it directed?—have a similar effect of turning our attention once again to the public, spatial character of the laugh itself that is the poem's prime mover upon the static elements of the town (dusk, road, fish joints, pool rooms, box-car, player piano) that the poem lists like ingredients in a recipe for which this laughter is ultimately the catalyst. Like a force of nature, it sets things in motion as the poem concludes:

> Shaking the lights in the fish joints,
> Rolling white balls in the pool rooms,
> And leaving untouched the box-car
> Some train has forgotten. (*CPLH*, 84)

This laughter makes things happen, affecting light and motion, its poem suggesting at the same time that a drama of American black-white relations is taking place: the fish joint "lights" and "white" cue balls are affected by the laughter, while the "dark" dusk is hardened by a laugh like an African drum from an ancestral past. Within this context, even the word "block" begins to sonically shade toward "black" to color both our reading and the neighborhood on the other side of the tracks in which the boxcar has been "forgotten." If we're willing to find a metaphor for U.S. race relations in the (national) train and untouched (black) boxcar, then "Railroad Avenue" becomes a poem

analyzing—perhaps even mythologizing—the potential and force of the modern black laugh.

Earlier I compared the black laugh to a thunderstorm. In moving toward a conclusion for my larger argument, I'd like to now turn briefly to Hughes's first novel, *Not without Laughter*, which was first published in 1930 and which, I think, makes the same meteorological comparison—in contrast to the technological one that Brown makes—in trying to articulate the force of the black laugh. *Not without Laughter* is the coming-of-age story of Sandy Williams, the only child of Annjee and Jimboy of Stanton, Kansas. The novel's title indicates the centrality of laughter to the book, as Sandy's growing up includes learning about the various types of laughter in the African American community, including the laughter of whites at blacks, the laughter in minstrel performances and shows, the "protective art of turning back a joke," the dozens, and competitive joking.[45] The novel's title comes from chapter 25, where Sandy reflects on the laughter of the adult black men hanging out at the local pool hall: "That must be the reason, thought Sandy, why poverty-stricken old Negroes like Uncle Dan Givens lived so long—because to them, no matter how hard life might be, it was not without laughter" (*NWL*, 267). The book is also full of noise, particularly as it is connected to the body of the black male, and that noise is especially characteristic of Sandy's frequently absent father Jimboy. When Jimboy comes home from his travels near the beginning of the book, chapter 5 begins: "Jimboy was home. All the neighborhood could hear his rich low baritone voice giving birth to the blues" (*NWL*, 50). Homecoming for Jimboy means more than returning to a house; it also means reentering and reclaiming a space in a local soundscape.

This is why I'd like to conclude with the storm that opens *Not without Laughter*, for not only does its thunder appear to herald Jimboy's return—a sort of sounding that blows him home—but it does so with the elemental force of the black laugh that we see Hughes investigating in "Railroad Avenue." This storm is a racialized, sonic event like the laughter in McKay's, Brown's, and Hughes's poetry, a "black wind [that] blew with terrific force, numbing the ear-drums" (*NWL*, 5). It becomes an ideal figure for African American acoustic power that reconfigures McKay's 1925 desire to stand "[l]ike a strong tree against a thousand storms" (*CP*, 209). In Hughes's revision, blackness no longer has to endure the storm; it becomes the storm. Furthermore,

the storm rolls through town damaging some property in the black community but ultimately killing two white people in an episode that recalls the white balls laughed across the pool tables in "Railroad Avenue." And just as Hughes refigures McKay's definition of strength, his storm seems to anticipate Brown as well, for while Brown's "New St. Louis Blues" describes how the "Black wind . . . mostly got de Jews an' us, / Got some ofays, but mostly got de Jews an' us," the cyclone in *Not without Laughter* reverses that equation, making the black wind an ally.[46]

Finally, in linking these forces to laughter in particular, I'd like to cite Hughes's description of the raging storm itself: "For a long while it roared on the roof of the house and pounded at the windows, until finally the two within became silent, hushing their cries. Then only the lashing noise of the water, coupled with the feeling that something terrible was happening, or had already happened, filled the evening air" (*NWL*, 6). At the beginning of a book about laughter written by a poet alert to the history of laughter and violence in American race relations, this chapter encourages us to hear the storm's "lashing noise" as its "laughing noise" as well—a sound that "filled the evening air" as it does the "dusk dark evening" in "Railroad Avenue." It is a sound that helps us to hear more fully the potential for, and poetics of, the modern black laugh.

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Notes

I would like to thank Roberto Ampuero, Laura Capp, Ed Folsom, Claire Fox, Loren Glass, Chad A. Hines, Dee Morris, Horace Porter, and Garrett Stewart for their many contributions to this essay.

1 On "noisy" authors, see Alexander G. Weheliye, *Phonographies: Grooves in Sonic Afro-Modernity* (Durham, N.C.: Duke Univ. Press, 2005), 39. Weheliye includes one poet, Nathaniel Mackey, on his list that otherwise consists entirely of prose writers. I borrow Houston A. Baker Jr.'s use of the word "sound" to indicate the sets or families of communications stemming from racial performance or identity; see *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1987). Baker argues that sensitivity to such noise is crucial because "[a] nation's emergence is always predicated on the construction of a field of meaningful sounds. Just as infants babble through a welter of phones to achieve the phonemics of a native language, so conglomerates of human beings seeking

national identity engage myriad sounds in order to achieve a vocabulary of *national* possibilities . . ." (71). Further references to *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* are to this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text as *MHR*. On "speakerly" texts, see Henry Louis Gates Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1988).

2 Claude McKay, "Song of New York," *Complete Poems*, ed. William J. Maxwell (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 2004), 212. Further references to McKay's poetry are to this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text as *CP*.

3 Sterling A. Brown, "Memo: For the Race Orators," *The Collected Poems of Sterling A. Brown* (New York: Harper and Row, 1980), 193. Further references to Brown's poetry are to this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text as *CPSB*.

4 Jonathan Sterne, *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction* (Durham, N.C.: Duke Univ. Press, 2003), 33.

5 Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1985), 6.

6 For an overview of sound studies, see Michele Hilmes, "Is There a Field Called Sound Culture Studies? And Does It Matter?" *American Quarterly* (March 2005): 249–59.

7 See Mel Watkins, *On the Real Side: Laughing, Lying, and Signifying—The Underground Tradition of African-American Humor That Transformed American Culture, from Slavery to Richard Pryor* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994).

8 Helene Johnson, "Sonnet to a Negro in Harlem," in *Helene Johnson: Poet of the Harlem Renaissance*, ed. Verner D. Mitchell (Amherst: Univ. of Massachusetts Press, 2000), 40; Joyce O. Hertzler, *Laughter: A Socio-Scientific Analysis* (New York: Exposition Press, 1970), 147.

9 Emily Thompson, *The Soundscape of Modernity: Architectural Acoustics and the Culture of Listening in America, 1900–1933* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002), 233. "Radios, electrically amplified phonographs, public address systems, and sound motion pictures," Thompson writes, "transformed the soundscape by introducing auditors not only to electronically reproduced sound but also to new ways of listening. As people self-consciously consumed these new products they became increasingly 'sound-conscious,' and the sound that they sought was of a particular type. Clear and focused, it issued directly toward them with little opportunity to reflect and reverberate off the surfaces of the room in which it was generated" (233–34). Thompson takes the term "sound-conscious" from "When Radio Answered a Call to Hollywood," *New York Times*, 10 August 1930, sec. 9.

10 Following Michel de Certeau's suggestion, I use the terms *mapping* and *territorializing* to explain how stories—and, in this case, sounds—"'go in

a procession' ahead of social practices in order to open a field for them" and thus "[open] a legitimate *theater* for practical *actions*"; see *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1984), 125.

11 Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2003), 60.

12 McKay, "Subway Wind," *CP*, 178.

13 See Countee Cullen's lines, "Yet do I marvel at this curious thing: / To make a poet black and bid him sing" ("Yet Do I Marvel," *My Soul's High Song: The Collected Writings of Countee Cullen, Voice of the Harlem Renaissance*, ed. Gerald Early [New York: Doubleday, 1991], 79).

14 My conception here of laughter as historical in character is an approach that many historians and scholars of the subject outside of African American studies have been hesitant to employ. From Plato to Thomas Hobbes to Sigmund Freud, to the spate of treatises on laughter that emerged concurrently with the new black laugh in the 1920s, laughter theorists have tended to construe laughter as "nonhistorical and unchanging" (see Mikhail Bakhtin's critique of Lucien Febvres, in *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky [Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1984], 134). Studies of laughter proliferated in the 1920s and 1930s during the Harlem Renaissance; see, for example, Martin Armstrong, *Laughing: An Essay* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1928); Carl G. Jung, "Your Negroid and Indian Behavior," *Forum* (April 1930): 193–99; C. W. Kimmins, *The Springs of Laughter* (London: Methuen, 1928); and Anthony M. Ludovici, *The Secret of Laughter* (New York: Viking Press, 1933). Henri Bergson, whose *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic* was first translated into English in 1911 by Cloudesley Brereton and Fred Rothwell (New York: Macmillan), received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1927; and Sigmund Freud's *Wit and Its Relation to the Unconscious* was translated into English in 1916 by Abraham A. Brill (New York: Moffat, Yard).

15 Mary Anderson, in *Before Freedom: Forty-Eight Oral Histories of Former North and South Carolina Slaves*, ed. Belinda Hurmence (New York: Mentor, 1990), 41, quoted in Mark M. Smith, *Listening to Nineteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2001), 241. Further references to *Listening* are to this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text as *LNA*.

16 Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Knopf, 1987), 141.

17 Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1944), 960.

18 "Letter from M.R.D.," *North Star*, 4 August 1848, reprinted in *African American Newspapers: The Nineteenth Century*, Accessible Archives: Primary Source Materials for Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Periodicals (Malvern, Pa.): http://www.accessible.com (September 2007).

19 Ambrose B. Hart to "Dear *Little* Emily," 6 February 1867, Ambrose B. Hart Papers, Miscellaneous Manuscripts Collection, Department of Special Collections, Smathers Library, University of Florida, Gainesville; quoted in *LNA*, 258.

20 Jessie Fauset, "The Gift of Laughter," in *Within the Circle: An Anthology of African-American Literary Criticism from the Harlem Renaissance to the Present*, ed. Angelyn Mitchell (Durham, N.C.: Duke Univ. Press, 1994), 45. In focusing on the rhetorical construction of black laughter on the stage and page in the material that follows, I do not intend to suggest that laughter "in the streets" went entirely unpoliced in the North. Not only was laughter seized upon as a site of particular concern in nineteenth-century discussions of African American social conduct, but it could also be the site of the conspicuous public exercise of power. An 1847 article from the *National Era* includes the following anecdote: "[I]t was said that one of the Moyamensing aldermen resorted to a new method of raising market money. 'Constable, bring me in a nigger!' The constable, being of like character, goes out, and seizing the first colored person he can find laughing loud, or standing unoccupied, he drags him before the alderman as a disturber of the peace or a vagrant" ("Correspondence of the Era. Things in Philadelphia," *National Era*, 16 December 1847, reprinted in *African American Newspapers: The Nineteenth Century*, Accessible Archives: Primary Source Materials for Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Periodicals [Malvern, Pa.]: http://www.accessible.com [September 2007].) As this report suggests, public laughter and its partner in revolution— apparent idleness—were heard and seen as challenges to white law and social order, and thus were subject to scrutiny and abuse.

21 James Fenimore Cooper, *Satanstoe* (1845; reprint, Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1962), 60, quoted in Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1993), 46. Further references to *Love and Theft* are to this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text as *LT*.

22 *Knickerbocker*, July 1840, 84, quoted in *LT*, 142.

23 James K. Kennard Jr., "Who Are Our National Poets?" *Knickerbocker*, October 1845, 333, quoted in *LT*, 57.

24 "Brebities," *Christian Recorder*, 9 March 1876, reprinted in *African American Newspapers: The Nineteenth Century*, Accessible Archives: Primary Source Materials for Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Periodicals (Malvern, Pa.): http://www.accessible.com (September 2007).

25 Jung, "Your Negroid and Indian Behavior," 193, 194, 196, 196.

26 Armstrong, *Laughing: An Essay*, 15.

27 Kimmins, *The Springs of Laughter*, 167, my emphasis.

28 "A Curious Hog Story," *Christian Recorder*, 6 September 1862, reprinted in *African American Newspapers: The Nineteenth Century*, Accessible

Archives: Primary Source Materials for Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Periodicals (Malvern, Pa.): http://www.accessible.com (September 2007).

29 In *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance*, Baker sets forth his now familiar argument that the discursive field created by the "mastery of form" and the "deformation of mastery" underwrites a specifically Afro-American modernism. In the former term, a black writer, artist, speaker, or performer (exemplified by Booker T. Washington's *Up from Slavery*) knowingly plays to white expectations of blackness in order to "[secure] publication for creative work that carries a deep-rooted African sound" (*MHR*, 49). If this "mastery of form conceals [and] disguises" (or masks), then a corresponding "deformation of mastery . . . distinguishes rather than conceals" and features "the loud assertion of possession" of one who is "advertising, with certainty, his unabashed *badness* . . . a go(uer)rilla action in the face of acknowledged adversaries" (50–51). Insofar as black laughers repeated the sounds of laughter that white listeners expected "as the sound of the Negro" (22) but did so aggressively—"with a signal difference," as Henry Louis Gates Jr. would say—their sonic production is modern in character (see *The Signifying Monkey*, xxiv).

30 Guidon (no full name), "Schools in the Indian Territory," *Christian Recorder*, 12 September 1878, reprinted in *African American Newspapers: The Nineteenth Century*, Accessible Archives: Primary Source Materials for Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Periodicals (Malvern, Pa.): http://www.accessible.com (September 2007).

31 McKay, "Note of Harlem," *CP*, 235.

32 Richard Wright, "We of the Streets," in Michel Fabre, "Appendix B," *The World of Richard Wright* (Jackson: Univ. Press of Mississippi, 1985), 247.

33 While poetry and laughter may take part in the same "noisy" project, it is also important to remember Moten's "break." Laughter and poetry aren't heard or read the same way. Poetry, Rachel Blau DuPlessis reminds us, is not just "an odd delivery system for ideas and themes." Rather, as she argues in setting forth a "social philology," a "critical, culturalist reading attends to the detail [of the poem] and can analyze dissonances, slippages, affirmations, and quirks within a range of verbal acts from discourses and semantic layering to the phoneme." That is, culturalist readings of poetry must "engage with poetry as such" as well as with the ways it shapes, and is shaped by, other public discourses (*Genders, Races, and Religious Cultures in Modern American Poetry, 1908–1934* [Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2001], 7). My readings thus seek to be especially alert to such "semantic layering" and phonemic play in the work of the poets under consideration in order to explore how poetry, as poetry, helps to configure the power and play of the modern black laugh.

34 By my count, more than 25 of the 114 poems in *CPSB* make at least one reference to laughter.

35 Thompson, *The Soundscape of Modernity*, 117; see especially 115–68.
36 Ralph Ellison, *Going to the Territory* (New York: Random House, 1986), 190. See also Watkins, *On the Real Side*, 18.
37 The birth of Superman in 1933, along with the superhero's transformative connections to the phone booth, indicates that the potential of this modern space resonated powerfully with modern audiences, especially where issues of power and identity were concerned. Indeed, the fact that Slim's laugh isn't transformed by the modern technology suggests that he is a sort of black superhero who doesn't capitulate to the demands of white space.
38 Mary Ross, "Negro City in Harlem Is a Race Capital," *New York Times*, 1 March 1925, sec. 8.
39 The fact that "Slim in Atlanta" (from *Southern Road*, 1932) targets "phone booth"—which the *OED* dates to 1927—also signals the speed, as well as persistence, at which black and white sounds (continue to) mix.
40 Langston Hughes's poems from the mid-1920s that reference laughter include "The South," "Laughers," "The Last Feast of Belshazzar," "Poppy Flower," "Negro Dancers," "I, Too," "Love Song for Antonia," "The Jester," "Jazz Band in a Parisian Cabaret," "Minstrel Man," "Young Sailor," "Joy," "Homesick Blues," "Pictures to the Wall," "Hard Luck," "Railroad Avenue," "Blues Fantasy," and "Lenox Avenue: Midnight."
41 Paul Laurence Dunbar, "We Wear the Mask," *The Collected Poetry of Paul Laurence Dunbar*, ed. Joanne M. Braxton (Charlottesville: Univ. Press of Virginia, 1993), 71.
42 Garrett Stewart, *Reading Voices: Literature and the Phonotext* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1990), 73, 6. Further references will be cited parenthetically in the text as *RV*.
43 Langston Hughes, "Homesick Blues," *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*, ed. Arnold Rampersad (New York: Vintage Classics), 72. Further references to Hughes's poetry are to this edition and will be parenthetically cited in the text as *CPLH*.
44 V. N. Volosinov, *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, trans. Ladislav Matejka and I. R. Titunik (New York: Seminar Press, 1973), 22.
45 Langston Hughes, *Not without Laughter* (New York: Knopf, 1930), 199. Further references are to this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text as *NWL*.
46 Brown, "New St. Louis Blues," *CPSB*, 68.