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# Two Trains Running: Capture and Escape in the Racialized Train Cars of the Jim Crow South, 1893-1930

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*TWO TRAINS RUNNING: CAPTURE AND ESCAPE IN THE RACIALIZED TRAIN CARS*  
OF THE JIM CROW SOUTH, 1893-1930

A Thesis  
presented in partial fulfillment of requirements  
for the degree of Master of Arts  
in the Department of English  
The University of Mississippi

by

RALEIGH MIXON ROBINSON

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## ABSTRACT

The role of the railroad in the modern American experience – and its role in *making* that experience modern – cannot be overstated. This thesis proposes to tell one of many possible railroad stories. By focusing on the historical and cultural relevance of a series of bodies in transit, I examine the implementation of railroad segregation law and the response by African-American performers. The thesis begins at the end of the nineteenth century with the Homer Plessy test case and continues across three decades, meeting along the way novelists Charles Chesnutt and James Weldon Johnson and musicians W. C. Handy, Henry “Ragtime Texas” Thomas, and Honeyboy Edwards. I find that by studying the train scenes and train sounds produced by these black men under the constraints of the Jim Crow South, we might come to a better understanding of the role of the railroad in American life, the role of segregation law in southern life, and the role of train experience in the expression of protest escaping from an African-American community caught in its “nadir.”

## DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my parents, who have been my most encouraging coaches and biggest fans, and to my sisters, whose ongoing successes are a source of inspiration.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I have arrived here after a change in course. That my arrival has been not only safe but the result of a delightful journey is thanks to the help of many. Jay Watson planted the seeds of the project, and, as my advisor, he has supplied invaluable guidance, through both invigorating dialogue and inspiringly conscientious and thought-provoking assistance during my drafting process. Adam Gussow introduced me to blues scholarship, and his intellectual and editorial contributions register throughout the work. Katie McKee helped me settle into the role of a teaching assistant during my first semester of Master's study, and I am thankful for her kind participation in my thesis work during my last.

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## I. INTRODUCTION: MODERN PROTEST

*If you wish to ride with me you must come into the "Jim Crow Car."*

—W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*

*[T]he railway journey was America's journey: railroads were catalyst for and symbol of a transformation in the "space" of the nation and the individual's place in it.*

—Barbara Young Welke, *Recasting American Liberty*

*There was no better example of the color line than the southern railroad.*

—Blair L.M. Kelley, *Right to Ride*

“As the south-bound train was leaving the station at Philadelphia, a gentleman took his seat in the single sleeping-car attached to the train, and proceeded to make himself comfortable” (73). So begins the chapter “A Journey Southward” in Charles Chesnut’s 1901 novel *The Marrow of Tradition*. The actions taken by Chesnut’s (temporarily) anonymous male character, although apparently unremarkable, vibrate with currents of social, political, and legal tension. It is a turn-of-the-twentieth-century American scene charged by its technological setting, a train, and by its geographical orientation, southbound. A reader attuned to these tensions would note the spatial constraints of the scene (“*his seat in the single sleeping-car attached to the train*”), the physical sensation attributed to the traveling, gendered body (“*proceeded to make himself comfortable*”), and the status marking assigned to that body (“*a gentleman*”). *The Marrow of Tradition* is a novel concerned with the exposure and examination of underlying social conflicts, conflicts usually expressed in private spaces or in coded language, and Chesnut’s train scene develops from unassuming generality into a study of border inscription, enforcement, and transgression, of bodies made uncomfortable.

Two years later, in his “Forethought” to the 1903 publication of *The Souls of Black Folks*, W. E. B. Du Bois announces the particular discomfort inherent in a particularly fraught



borderline. Calling his reader's attention to "the strange meaning of being black here in the dawning of the Twentieth Century," Du Bois proclaims, "the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color line" (5).<sup>1</sup> If this historical moment might be conceived of as a kind of dawn, it cast modern (cinematic) light on modern (mechanical) space. The innovative spectacle that unfolded before the eyes of Chesnut's turn-of-the-century audience revealed color-line mechanics, social and legal innovations to match the industrial ones. More than viewers, these audience members were themselves involved bodily in the technologies and regulations of the modern age; as participants in a comprehensive sensory experience, they were physically subject to the mechanization as well as to the segregative legal apparatuses built onto and into modern machines. And, as Barbara Welke and Blair Kelley make clear, the clearest stage for America's modern spectacle, that is, the clearest site for the modern body's exposure to simultaneous mechanization and legalization, was the railroad train.

I am not only interested, following Welke, in the individual's place in the transforming space of the nation, but in the passenger's performance of identity therein, a *railroad performance* of "strange" racial meaning, after Du Bois' concern. I will be examining the historical forces transmitted within railroad scenes like Chesnut's and will be reading the performances produced by subjects moving within these channels. My focus centers on the constitutive elements of "A Journey Southward" and on the period of its production. I find that black male passengers traveling southern rail lines, from the late nineteenth into the early twentieth century, enter an economy of geographically, technologically, and legally inflected surveillance, a network of social exchange that calls for particular performances of identity.

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<sup>1</sup> A claim *sounded* by Du Bois three years earlier in his address "To the Nations of the World," in London, at the first Pan-African conference in London (*Souls* 5).

Chesnutt's (moving) stage exhibits as much. The "gentleman" passenger, as the train picks up speed, just as rapidly loses his anonymity: "When the train had left the city behind, he [...] looked around at the other occupants of the car. One of these, who had been on the car since it had left New York, rose from his seat upon perceiving the other's glance, and came down the aisle" (73). While the most apparent result of this mutual recognition is to inform the reader of the names of, positions held by, and relationship between two men – the *gentleman* "Dr. Burns" and the *other occupant* "Dr. Miller" – we should be careful to note the spatially invested, ocular interest exhibited by the exchanged glances. Seat-assigned passengers are, indeed, never truly anonymous but carry with them geographical markers, like William Miller who has been contained by the railroad car, according to the watchful narrator, "since [...] New York." The railroad car, in this view, is a screen on which the passenger is projected, a site invested with sensorial concerns about the identity of others.<sup>2</sup>

The narrator intensifies the ocular exchange, creating a tinted lens through which the reader views the passengers, and so further delimits their identities in racial terms through color line inscription. The doctors represent two "types of manhood," viewed through an "American eye" whereby "the differences would be the more striking, or at least the more immediately apparent, for the first was white and the second black, or, more correctly speaking, brown; it was even a light brown, but both his swarthy complexion and his curly hair revealed what has been described in the laws of some of our states as a 'visible admixture' of African blood" (74). This passage is at once a finely focused (the zooming-in nearly palpable with the string of punctuation marks and modifying phrases), sensorial view of identities-made-racial and a sight inescapably *textual*, going so far as legal citation. Chesnutt shows the incoherence of a moving image

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<sup>2</sup> The cinematic quality of railroad travel (or, to correct the anachronism, the railroad quality of cinema) will be explored below.

captured typographically by highlighting the complexities at work in a phrase like ““visible admixture.”” The passage opens space for performance through the presence of ambiguity: denoting Miller’s race demands an effort (“more correctly speaking”), for his skin and features frustrate attempts at the white/black legal logic that directs “an American eye.” Indeed, the scene, as I will argue more fully below in Chapter III (A), amounts to a sharply tuned critique of the 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* Supreme Court decision.

The court case that established the constitutional basis for *de jure* segregation, *Plessy v. Ferguson* revolved around Homer Plessy’s ambiguous race, the way his features moved between white and black. In his presentation of a racial-identity-in-motion, Homer Plessy performed audio/visual protest against the Louisiana railroad segregation law. As part of a “test case” effort, Plessy was chosen due to his light skin color; as his legal counsel put it, in direct visual assault on the generic legal phrase cited by Chesnutt, ““the mixture of colored blood is not discernible”” (qtd. in Lofgren 41). According to the historical record, Plessy had to audibly announce his racial identity to the train’s conductor, the visible performed verbally: ““I have to tell you that, according to Louisiana law, I am a colored man”” (qtd. in Fireside 1; emphasis added).<sup>3</sup> Plessy, in this way, points up the sensorial gap that ambiguity creates between the letter of segregation law and its implementation, a gap I read as space for performance of identity, for critique and protest. Just as Chesnutt’s train moves across state lines – a continual state of ambivalence – Homer Plessy moves before the conductor’s eyes, from “white” to “colored,” and, when he refuses to move himself to the train car so marked, from a legal status to an illegal one. By upholding the Louisiana law, the Supreme Court reprises the role of the uncomfortably mistaken

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<sup>3</sup> Joseph Roach, in *Cities of the Dead*, notes that Plessy and his legal team had “scripted every move beforehand, including the revelation, *elusive to the eye*, that Homer Plessy was not white” (235; emphasis added).

conductor attempting to stabilize social relations.<sup>4</sup> Taken together, the creation and implementation of segregation law were acts in a legal production best viewed as an innovation meant to keep pace with the rapidly developing railroad system, a late-nineteenth-century phenomenon, particularly in the South.<sup>5</sup>

Train cars like Chesnutt's and Plessy's are sites where race simultaneously attracts and escapes detection. Railroad bodies are physically contained in a car, economically tracked by origin and destination, legally marked by gender, class, and racial status; and yet, railroad bodies are bodies always in motion. There is a persistently Brownian quality to them in the fluid, placeless zone of transportation, an indeterminacy that belies appearances of stability. I will be reading the way figures like William Miller respond to directions (when ordered into the "Colored" Jim Crow car) or the way, like Homer Plessy, they give directions ("I am a colored man"). And, as will be seen, there is a complex array of possible performances, for even as Miller obeys the conductor's orders, there is an "unobserved" passenger, Josh Green, who rides on "one of the rear trucks" beyond surveillance, uncaptured by state lines and legal signs (Chesnutt 81).

I read performances of identity that oppose and problematize the color line – Miller's indeterminate color, Green's indeterminate location – as acts of political protest. In challenging efforts at social organization, they are acts of misfit identity, and so it is Du Bois's notion of "strange meaning" that attracts my attention, meaning's *movement* from usual to unusual, from

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<sup>4</sup> The uncomfortable silence may itself have been part of the performance. The Louisville and Nashville Railroad Company apparently agreed to participate in the test case, as Charles Lofgren finds: "Officers of the [company] admitted [to attorneys building the test case] that they did not enforce the law [...] 'owing to the expenses entailed'" (32).

<sup>5</sup> Historian Edward L. Ayers writes of southern railroading in *The Promise of a New South*: "From the end of Reconstruction to the end of the century the South built railroads faster than the nation as a whole. Different lines raced from one subregion to another, competing for key territories; by 1890, nine out of every ten Southerners lived in a railroad county" (9).

expectation to shock.<sup>6</sup> Just as the landscape viewed from a moving train's window blurs and shimmers, just as the train passenger's body shakes and jostles and shifts, so too does the color line become unstable when situated in the active, dynamic environment of the railroad car, and so too does the identity of the always active train passenger become unstable in fleeing from the capturing, regulating elements of space and time.<sup>7</sup> As Du Bois's concept of "double consciousness" makes clear, racial dichotomies tend towards ambivalence for the turn-of-the-twentieth-century black citizen (an ambivalent term in itself), even as those dichotomies are being loudly – and violently – insisted upon by white hegemony.<sup>8</sup> The railway made bodies at once mobile (free to move) and immobile (regulated/restricted), a duality that organizes this thesis.

John Giggie, in *After Redemption*, his important study of black churches in the post-Reconstruction Delta, writes of the duality of train travel: "At once a site of limitation, through the deployment of segregation law and assignment to Jim Crow cars, and an engine for mobility and change, the railroad was a cultural signifier of great ambivalence" (25). I follow Giggie in focusing on southern signification and southern ambivalence, for though railroad expansion and its racial implications constituted a national (not to say global) experience, the U.S. South was a site given to a particularly sudden, shocking inclusion into the nation's railway network and was a society taking particularly dramatic steps towards instituting a calcified racial order –

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<sup>6</sup> Just as "black" is made strange and moves when Chesnut's description of Miller tacks on the additional phrases meant to disambiguate.

<sup>7</sup> Again, the train's dual nature is highly relevant as a force at once liberating and imprisoning. Wolfgang Schivelbusch writes of early railroad travel, "As the natural irregularities of the terrain that were perceptible on the old roads were replaced by the sharp linearity of the railroad, the traveler felt that he lost contact with the landscape, and surely experienced this most directly when going through a tunnel" (23). As for time, "In 1889, the United States was divided into four time zones, essentially unchanged to this day; officially, at first, the times within the zones were regarded only as railroad time; in practice, these became regional standard times, although they were not given legal recognition until 1918" (44). *Tempus fugit* but, according to railroad rhythm, in an increasingly structured manner.

<sup>8</sup> According to Slavoj Žižek, in *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections*, verbal/textual insistence and violence are intertwined: "verbal violence is not a secondary distortion, but the ultimate resort of every specifically human violence" (66).

particularly in the blossoming, slippery social spaces of train cars.<sup>9</sup> Giggie finds that railroad actions, “the ability to board a train and travel to a destination of one’s own choosing,” carried liberating significance – a legal, as well as political, phenomenon – “for a people only recently emancipated and still subject to laws crafted to limit their mobility” (24). Indeed, turn-of-the-century vagrancy laws and the economic restrictions of the Jim Crow system (most striking, perhaps, in the plight of sharecroppers, represented in the pages ahead by blues musicians Henry Thomas and Honeyboy Edwards) further “chained” black citizens to socioeconomic limitations (black sharecroppers to farmland). “As a result, blacks riding their first train often experienced a heady sense of mastery over the world around them” (Giggie 24). Giggie reads a sense of protest in the acts of “rural African Americans living in the New South” for whom the railroad was a spiritual means by which to “expose the flexible and tenuous nature of the color line supposedly governing southern life in strict and unyielding terms” (58). But I wish to go further, to read secular railroad performances, in their exposure of color line impossibility, as acts of *modern political protest*.

From Plessy’s instigating test case performance to the 1896 Supreme Court decision, from Chesnut’s 1901 novel to James Weldon Johnson’s 1911 novel *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, and from the memoirs of musicians W. C. Handy and Honeyboy Edwards and the biography of Henry Thomas to the recorded blues song “Railroadin’ Some” by Thomas, I will read scenes and sounds of railroad protest. These black men expressed self-fashioned identities in a Jim Crow South that attempted to fix their identity, contain their movement, and limit their

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<sup>9</sup> Grace Elizabeth Hale describes the southern rail phenomenon in *Making Whiteness* as an invasive species, “like kudzu, tangling the most rural southern reaches of piney woods and mountain coves into a strong and living web. From the end of Reconstruction through the dawning of the twentieth century, southerners built railroads more rapidly than Americans of any other region” (123). In arguing that the spread of segregation implementation and enforcement followed rail corridors, Hale claims quite simply, “Segregation was modern” (130). John Stilgoe explores the concept of provincial places joining an urban network via nineteenth century rail lines in his *Metropolitan Corridor and the American Scene*.

citizenship. As citizens of southern states they were neither protected by the social order nor given license to speak against it, but, as *railroad performers*, they were provided a platform and an amplifier by which to voice protest.

I am taking as textual center the *Plessy* case – and Chesnutt’s response – and so reading railroad performances of *male* identity in Jim Crow train cars. *Plessy*’s gender in some ways sets my gendered focus, but I am also guided by the intense attention paid to black males by representatives of white hegemony.<sup>10</sup> By focusing on male performances, I am, like *Plessy*’s attorneys, Chesnutt, and Johnson, focusing on the color line at the cost of downplaying the forces at work around the gender line. As for itinerant blues musicians Thomas and Edwards, their railroad activity – hoboing – was largely gender-specific.<sup>11</sup> Black women suffered just as deeply and protested just as bravely (as evidenced by the proliferation of tort cases brought by black women in the 1880s), and there are female performances (legal, novelistic, musical) just as historically important and thematically relevant.<sup>12</sup> However, for the purposes of this thesis, I will

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<sup>10</sup> In *The Crucible of Race*, Joel Williamson turns his “rise of Radical racism” thesis on white fear of black male sexuality: “By 1889 the ‘New Negro,’ as white supremacists labeled him [...] was a new man, and his potential was unknown. [M]any southerners were concluding that [...] the New Negro was reverting to a native savagery. The reversion, they concluded, came to its most conspicuous crisis in attempts by black men to rape white women” (111). And Ayers finds train cars to be anxious spaces owing to their potential for erotic contact, “The sexual charge that might be created among strangers temporarily placed in intimate surroundings, many whites worried, could not be tolerated in a racially integrated car” (140).

<sup>11</sup> Although this was not exclusively true, as the folk figure Boxcar Bertha reveals (see her autobiography, *Sister of the Road* [as told to Ben Reitman, 1937], and Martin Scorsese’s 1972 film *Boxcar Bertha*). However, as Welke observes: “it was men and boys who illegally hitched rides on passenger and freight trains [...] a freedom and mobility from which women were effectively excluded by the combined weight of clothing and culture” (49).

<sup>12</sup> As Welke, Robin Kelley, and Hale convincingly show. Blair Kelley discusses at some length the choice of a male passenger for the Louisiana test case that became *Plessy*. “It is unclear why a woman was not chosen as a test subject. [Local attorney Louis] Martinet had made the suggestion, but [retained legal talent, New Yorker Albion] Tourgee’s interest in a phenotypically white litigant overshadowed the issue of gender” (*Right 77*). Kelley finds clear legal advantages to a hypothetical female litigant: “A man would be a less sympathetic figure; the second-class smoking car was always seen as male terrain, so the argument that riding in second class facilities harmed them was less meaningful. [...] If a woman had been chosen to protest being barred from the ladies’ car, the committee would have been able to present a forceful and more dramatic case about the danger and damage of Jim Crow” (*Right 77, 78*). See also Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina, 1896-1920* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1996); Angela Y. Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1999); Ida B. Wells-Barnett, *Crusade for Justice: The Autobiography of Ida B. Wells*, ed. Alfreda M. Duster (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970).

be primarily focused on the *Plessy*-derived experience of the African American male and his railroad performance.

I will be arguing that these railroad performers protested through narratives of capture and escape across what James C. Scott, in *Domination and the Art of Resistance*, calls *public* and *hidden transcripts*. By examining various forms of performance transmission, Scott argues, “we might more successfully read, interpret, and understand the often fugitive political conduct of subordinate groups” (xii). Railroad performances are just such “fugitive political conduct,” “strategic pose[s]” assumed in the face of the powerful, those who “have an interest in overdramatizing their reputation and mastery.” “Every subordinate group creates, out of its ordeal,” Scott finds, “a ‘hidden transcript’ that represents a critique of power spoken behind the back of the dominant” (xii). The performances read below represent critiques spoken by expressive voices within a subordinate group, a group segregated, immobilized, imprisoned, exploited, silenced. These performers strike *modern* strategic poses in relation to the modernizing presence and possibility of the railroad. The production of texts and their reception within the modern sensorium – a concept to be fleshed out below – will be my primary focus.<sup>13</sup> The categories of hidden and public allow me to decipher the movement of transcripts (texts and sound) from back-stage to before-an-audience, to track diverse, “strange” meanings of race during the dawn of the twentieth century.

As a crucial component of this argument, I find that the performance of political protest – against white hegemony, against color line boundaries – calls for cultural *equipment* with which to perform. The stage props for racial performance have meanings at once loaded and shifting, particularly in view of the minstrel show tradition, a century old by the time Henry Thomas steps

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<sup>13</sup> The final section of Chapter III will present the aural texts of blues music, listening to what was heard in addition to reading what was read.



into the recording studio.<sup>14</sup> Signs of race in the turn-of-the-twentieth-century Jim Crow South also included lynching, and the decades under examination here contained that activity's peak. There were, on stage, street, and – most horrifyingly – scaffold, dangerously recognizable costumes and tropes, creating a highly stylized *and* contested zone of performance.

John Szwed, in discussing the two-way exchange of culture between a dominant (“high status”) group and a dominated (“low status”) group, calls minstrelsy (*minstrelization*) “the process by which the low are characterized or emulated within a carefully regulated and socially approved context” (85). Passing from high to low requires only “a minimal number of cultural techniques,” while passing from low to high, a kind of reverse minstrelsy, requires a much more arduous performance. “[T]he low-status member must first possess a physique at least marginally similar to the dominant group’s and must additionally master the high-status group’s cultural devices” (Szwed 85). Passing from a black identity to a white one will bear directly on my discussion of Johnson’s *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* but for now might be viewed a form of equipage available to black voices seeking to disseminate a message of protest across the color line (or, in Scott’s terms, to make hidden transcripts public). The railroad, I argue, does the mobile protester’s arduous work for him, in a manner appropriate to the machine age. If the southern stage-setting presented black performers with what Houston Baker calls “a durative (unceasingly oppressive) landscape” (7), the train provides a “physique” and “device” by which an (unceasingly) oppressed black subject can (continue to) speak with a modern voice to a modern audience and by which he can argue against the legal precepts of *Plessy*, against the efforts of surveillance and control endemic to color line inscription.<sup>15</sup> I find that the railroad

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<sup>14</sup> See Eric Lott’s thorough reading of minstrelsy’s social origins and complex economy in *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

<sup>15</sup> See also Baker’s analysis of the disciplinary regime of the southern plantation-prison complex in *Turning South Again: Rethinking Modernism/Re-reading Booker T.* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), 79-98.

becomes a powerful, mobile piece of expressive equipment for the African American performers of my study.

As with any performance before an audience – or, in Plessy’s case, before a panel of judges – the performer attempts to connect emotionally with the audience. Layered onto and within the sounds of protest of railroad performances in the Jim Crow South are signs of modern emotions. Welke discovers emotional histories within the transcripts of courtroom trials adjudicating tort claims against railroad companies for physical injuries – including dismemberment and death – and psychological injuries categorized as “shock,” a modern phenomenon of the industrial age (139-235). Trains, in multiple senses, moved their passengers.

I will thus be paying close attention to the bodily experience of train travelers and to the role of that experience in the protests emanating from their works. I argue that, given the technological setting of train travel and the historical setting of segregation, the turn-of-the-century body itself was violated by the color line in train cars. In this sense, the *textual* labeling of a traveler as “colored” or (as aggressively if more favorably in material terms) as “white,” created an initial *physical* act that transformed the space of the train car into a site of violence.<sup>16</sup> Within this surveillance and marking, one sees violence done in broad strokes (and broad daylight), as racial identification was imposed on *all* bodies by an outside authority – by the conductor or, as William Miller experiences in *The Marrow of Tradition*, by the conductor in conjunction with other passengers.<sup>17</sup> In this sense, to ride by train was to concede sovereignty and dignity. Railroad performers thus faced a symbolic apparatus that demanded reimagining,

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<sup>16</sup> Chesnutt indicates the textual violence carried by descriptions in “the laws of some of our states,” a concept discussed by Žižek in *Violence*, 58-73.

<sup>17</sup> David Delaney writes, in *Race, Place, and the Law, 1836-1948*, “as a matter of practice de juration put the force of the state into the hands of any white person who chose to exercise it. It deputized every streetcar operator, every shop clerk or nurse, every concerned citizen or librarian, and allowed or compelled them to draw and police the color line as they went through their daily lives” (101). Blair Kelley writes, “White passengers clearly had tremendous authority to govern racial conditions in first-class cars” (*Right* 41).

that called for the transformation of a calcifying site of racial conflict into a piece of meaningfully mobile equipment for self-expression.

The Jim Crow legal regime attempted to capture the black body in transit, and the history of rebellion extends, in one view, from the Underground Railroad to the Freedom Riders. The political need for mobility was great during an era of dis-enfranchisement and involved a nationwide struggle for recognition. I find particularly performative protest exhibited around, in Joseph Roach's term, the railroad as "behavioral vortex," a space created by "technological innovation" and "social organization," "where the gravitational pull of social necessity brings audiences together and produces performers [...] from their midst" (28).<sup>18</sup> Viewed as a vortex of social forces, the segregated southern railroad calls for study as a site that produced new settings and, in turn, stimulated new (novel, modern) performances of identity. Furthermore, I find in the railroad-vortex a primary site of political action for citizens in need of an arena for resistance.<sup>19</sup>

This thesis will proceed in two sections organized by terms borrowed from performance studies: the historical context considered "Stage Setting" in Chapter II, a stage constituted by sensory apparatuses of trains and race; and the impact within that setting of selected texts and songs considered "Performances of Protest" in Chapter III. Additionally, each section takes up the dialectic of railroad movement, the passenger's experience of simultaneous passivity and activity, which I read as a circuit between what might be termed *train sensation* – the body acted upon by sights, sounds, and feelings – and *train communication* – both the expressive deployment of the railroad, in novelistic scenes and blues reminiscences and songs, and the body itself *acting*, expressively deploying voice, gesture, and movement within the railroad setting. I

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<sup>18</sup> For Roach, behavioral vortices draw in performers and audience at once, allowing for the transmission of tradition under the "revolutionary circumstances" of a "circum-Atlantic interculture" (5).

<sup>19</sup> In relation to the militaristic nature of railroad interiors, Hale calls trains the "first battlefields" of southern segregation (123).

find the dual nature of the turn-of-the-twentieth-century railroad to create, playing off Roach's term, an *expressive vortex*, a site for powerfully visible, audible, and physical protest by modern, black, male bodies and voices.

## II. STAGE SETTING

I have chosen to discuss the southern railroad experiences of African-American men during the Jim Crow era in terms of “stage setting.” This theoretical move, primarily, allows me to consider expressions of protests in Chapter III as species of performance, in accord with performance theory, but, additionally, thinking about southern segregation in spatial terms is thoroughly appropriate for a region in the process of color-line inscription. Indeed, one finds that turn-of-the-century race is less a matter of color than of *spatial positioning*. Du Bois signals as much with his powerful use of the “veil” metaphor in *The Souls of Black Folk*, and Homer Plessy, as noted above, announces his “colored race” in order to inform the conductor of Plessy’s spatial misplacement.<sup>20</sup> I will detail the process and effect of the spatialization of race in section (B) below, but, before encountering the sensation of *Plessy*-era race assignment, it bears examining the more general spatial sensations involved in the experience of what Barbara Welke calls the “Railroad Revolution” – that is, the modern American body’s experience of modern American movement – and the southern experience in particular. What might be said of railroad travel in terms of the turn-of-the-twentieth-century sensorium? And, more specifically, how did southern Americans incorporate the new mode of experience into their lives?

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<sup>20</sup> Du Bois poses his moment of racial “revelation” in a schoolhouse in his “early days of rollicking boyhood”: “Then it dawned upon me with a certain suddenness that I was different from the others; or like, mayhap, in heart and life and longing, but shut out from their world by a vast veil” (*Souls* 10).

## (A) The Sensation of Train Travel

*In traditional accounts of the cinema's first audiences, one image stands out: the terrified reaction of spectators to Lumière's Arrival of a Train at the Station. According to a variety of historians, spectators reared back in their seats, or screamed, or got up and ran from the auditorium (or all three in succession).*

—Tom Gunning, "An Aesthetic of Astonishment"

*One suspects that black men all too frequently were forced to jump from moving trains for [...] real or imagined encroachments of white space.*

—Barbara Young Welke, *Recasting American Liberty*

A turn-of-the-century American train passenger was drawn into an immediate, localized movement (here to there) and into a macro, regional and national motion. Tabling, for the moment, the micro effects of moving by train (and the racial register of those effects), I find in Welke's statistical account a sense of the macro, of the American and southern experiences: "In the single decade from 1880-1890 total railroad mileage in the U.S. had almost doubled, from 87,801 miles to 163,562 miles. In those same years, the number of passengers carried more than doubled, from just under 241 million in 1881 to over 498 million in 1890" (15). As for regional growth, the South participated in an intensified version of the "railroad revolution," both in terms of track mileage – increasing between 1880 and 1890 from less than 15,000 to over 29,000 – and in terms of post-bellum reunification with the North – adopting "railroad time" in 1883 and standardizing track gauge in 1886 (Welke 263). Southerners, in particular, experienced a revolution in their relationship to space and place as rail lines exploded into ubiquity in the decade before *Plessy*. While Welke focuses on the legal and administrative fallout, I am interested in the sensory fallout.

Southern communities, as they became linked – to one another and to urban centers – by the railroad, entered modernity. Marshall Berman, in his study of modern experience, *All That is Solid Melts Into Air*, reads modernity through the expressive vortex of the cityscape. Urban life was undergoing the acceleration of modernizing life, and the "archetypal" modern subject is for

Berman “a pedestrian thrown into the maelstrom of modern city traffic, a man alone contending against an agglomeration of mass and energy that is heavy, fast and lethal.” This “mass” “spills over into every urban space, imposes its tempo on everybody’s time, transforms the whole modern environment into a ‘moving chaos’” (159).<sup>21</sup> However, in a footnote, Berman refuses to extend modern chaotic movement to the railroad. For the railroad, as he describes it, “ran on a fixed schedule along a prescribed route, and so, for all its demonic potentialities, became a nineteenth-century paradigm of order” (159). While there was certainly a force of order imposed on the burgeoning railroad system (and so upon its passengers), Berman’s dismissal is too hasty by far. Late-nineteenth, early-twentieth century trains threw modern bodies into a “maelstrom” of “mass and energy” of its own particular intensity.

As literary critic Enda Duffy notes in *The Speed Handbook*: “A reimagining of the significance of particular kinds of spaces, both local and geopolitical, is discernible in both mass and high culture around the beginning of the twentieth century, achieved by the arousal of intense emotions about spaces, ranging from frustration to fear” (100). One pathway into this intensity of spatial sensation is through another apparent paradigm of order, the cinema, as the above pairing of quotations from Tom Gunning and Barbara Welke indicates.<sup>22</sup> The movie house’s well-ordered seats, frame-by-frame running reels, darkened space, and calmly seated viewers: all these well-known features belie the jarring spectacle that confronts the wrought-up spectator.<sup>23</sup> Ben Singer, in *Melodrama and Modernity*, notes “the frequency with which early

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<sup>21</sup> Berman reads nineteenth century Paris through “Baudelaire’s primal scene: ‘I was moving crossing the boulevard, in a great hurry, in the midst of a moving chaos, with death galloping at me from every side’” (159). This horsedrawn violence prefigures, for Berman, the greater violence of streetcars and automobiles that eventually engulfs the Parisian boulevards.

<sup>22</sup> Lynne Kirby, in *Parallel Tracks: The Railroad and Silent Cinema*, finds that the railroad “forms a paradigm for the cinema,” and she argues for an intimate connection between the innovations through the concept of the “spectator-passenger” (3, passim).

<sup>23</sup> Gunning draws “a vital relation” between variety theater and early cinema (often shown in conjunction during vaudeville programs) and, drawing on a writing by Futurism’s founder Filippo Marinetti, describes the nature of

moviegoers [...] described cinema as a medium of powerful fleeting impression, kinetic speed, novel sights, superabundant juxtaposition, and visceral stimulation, and therefore as a medium in which people perceived a striking resemblance to modern urban experience” (130). Gunning describes early cinema as “a series of visual shocks,” and he situates the cinematic experience as responsive to the modern urban maelstrom: “Expanding urbanisation with its kaleidoscopic succession of city sights, the growth of a consumer society with its new emphasis on stimulating spending through visual display [...] provoked the desire for images and attractions” (“Astonishment” 33, 40). And a major source for what Gunning calls “the cinema of attractions” was the railroad train, a dynamic producer of Singer’s “powerful fleeting impression, kinetic speed, [...] and visceral stimulation.” The intimate, lock-step connection between trains and early cinema is supported by the production of films, in addition to *Arrival of a Train at the Station*, depicting a panorama captured by a camera affixed to the front or rear of a moving train, “which pulls the seated viewer through space,” and by films depicting a train accident like Edison’s 1904 *The Railroad Smash-Up* (Gunning, “Astonishment” 40, 37).<sup>24</sup>

The story of the Lumières’ leaping spectators, the description of a viewer “pull[ed] through space,” and the cinema audience’s interest in the visceral violence of a train collision (bodily impact made visual) all highlight a modern desire for the sensation of accelerating *movement*. The sensorial immersion demanded by a train-riding, cinema-going American audience is perhaps most evident in the example of *Hale’s Tours and Scenes of the World*, a

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viewership at such venues: “The spectator at the variety theater feels directly addressed by the spectacle and joins in, singing along, heckling the comedians” (“Attraction” 66). I will be (partially) exploring manifestations of the active spectatorship of *dancing*, in Chapter III, particularly the way white audience members get bodily drawn into black musical performance.

<sup>24</sup> See also Fredric Jameson’s discussion of “the embodiment of new forms of the psychic subject on the physical sensorium” in the “cinematographic perception” of the train passenger looking through the window in *The Political Unconscious* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), 44.



series of travel films at their height of popularity from 1906-1909.<sup>25</sup> This commodified sensory experience combined train travel and film, and not only did the spectator see footage filmed from atop a moving train, but “the theater itself was arranged as a train car, with a conductor who took tickets, and sound effects simulating the click-clack of wheels and hiss of air brakes” (Gunning, “Attraction” 65).<sup>26</sup> Lauren Rabinovitz calls Hale’s Tours “the culmination of a spectatorial experience of sensory fascination in early cinema,” noting further that “these rides foregrounded the body itself as a site for sensory experience” (167). In addition to sight and sound effects, there were direct touches to the bodies of the passengers, as the cars themselves would jolt from side to side, and “blasts of air” would blow on the “travelers” (Rabinovitz 169).<sup>27</sup> Thus, a sensorium developed for an American attempting to incorporate train travel and other “fast and lethal” sensations into daily experience during the rise of modernity. This sensorium in many ways was built upon the physical impressions of the body seated inside a train car, a body administered by a conductor, a body attempting to acclimate to sounds and images at once jarring and ephemeral. Reading backwards, then, from representative form to source of inspiration, what do the cinematic representations indicate about the nature of railroad travel?

Barbara Welke centers *Recasting American Liberty* on the occurrence of accidental injury during railway journeys and the narratives produced about injuries in public and legal discourse.

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<sup>25</sup> Hale’s Tours, according to Gunning, was “the largest chain of theaters exclusively showing films [that consisted] of sequences taken from vehicles (usually trains)” (“Attraction” 65).

<sup>26</sup> Gunning further connects this “ride” to those found in the nascent fairgrounds popping up around urban areas. “The relation between films and the emergence of the great amusement parks, such as Coney Island, at the turn of the century provides rich ground for rethinking the roots of early cinema” (“Attraction” 65). (One ride, “The Leap From Railway,” featured “[t]wo electric cars containing as many as forty people [...] set towards each other at great speed on a collision course. Just before impact one car was lifted up on curved rails and skimmed over the top of the other” (“Astonishment” 37).) Coney Island, the “first modern amusement park,” opened in 1895, during the interval between Homer Plessy’s interrupted train journey and the Supreme Court decision, and so I see rich ground for rethinking the roots of segregation law in terms of modern sensation; roller coasters were, after all, “thoroughly committed to raw physical experience [and] celebrated [...] in public” (Duffy 104). See also Bill Brown’s *The Material Unconscious: American Amusement, Stephen Crane, and the Economies of Play* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996).

<sup>27</sup> Raymond Fielding describes the tilting effect: “the whole car was to be pivoted on its longitudinal axis so that the operator could, by throwing a lever, sway the car from side to side during the performance” (“Hale’s Tours” 122).

The space of the turn-of-the-century train car throbbed with multiform hyper-sensation but sensation invested with *violence*, a phenomenon best shown through contemporary accounts. Charles Francis Adams – great grandson of John Adams, Civil War General, and president of the Union Pacific Railroad – described the railroad as ““a practically irresistible force crashing through the busy hive of modern civilization at a wild rate of speed”” (qtd. in Welke 20). Another observer describes the speeding railroad as an outlandishly powerful cannon, a kind of modern violence incarnate: ““Seventy-five miles an hour is one hundred and ten feet a second, [...] and the energy of four hundred tons moving at that rate is nearly twice as great as that of a two-thousand pound shot fired from a hundred-ton Armstrong gun”” (qtd. in Welke 20).<sup>28</sup> The sensory organs themselves were drawn into the chaotic motion, as an 1884 text describes the ““pulling at the eyeballs on looking out of the window [...]. [T]he eyes are strained, the ears are dinned, the muscles jostled hither and thither, and the nerves are worried by the attempt to maintain order, and so comes weariness”” (qtd. in Welke 22). These are the sensations exploited by Hale’s Tours two decades later, when the “weariness” becomes a sought-after state.

Railroad travel, in addition to over-exerting eyes, ears, and muscles, was an increasingly dangerous endeavor during the decades around 1900. If Rabinovitz finds that Hale’s Tours “foregrounded the body as a site for sensory experience,” Welke shows, in late-nineteenth-century medical discourse, a rise in doctors’ “sensitiv[ity] to the impact of the railway journey on the mind and body,” a sign that the passenger was a locus of pain and discomfort (22). The first ten years of the twentieth century saw the number of train passengers harmed on a rollercoaster-

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<sup>28</sup> An analogy that figures neatly into a famous scene from the 1903 film *The Great Train Robbery* in which a “spectacularly enlarged outlaw unload[s] a pistol” in a “direct assault” on the senses of the audience (Gunning, “Attraction” 70). Blues musician Honeyboy Edwards, whose hoboing experiences figure into the discussion below and whose blues musicianship figures into the performances read in Chapter III, discusses a particularly violent concurrence of train and gun: “There used to be railroad dicks, men who would ride the train. They’d pull you off the train but they wouldn’t give you no time. [...] Sometimes they’d try to shoot you off!” (Edwards 36).

like rise: in 1901, 5,270 passengers were injured or killed; in 1913 the number peaked at 16,942 (notably the years bookending the popularity of Hale's Tours) (Welke 14-15). The train-borne body, with its raw nerves and susceptibility to injury, had an uncomfortably intimate relationship to the "wild" machine carrying it: "Experts compared trains to animals without muscles: the passenger's body became the machine's muscular structure unconsciously attempting to absorb the shocks of the journey" (qtd. in Welke 22).

Learning to ride the train, if an "unconscious" effort, amounted to a process of modernization: modern bodies learning to move in modern ways. Like Berman's city walker to the chaotic movement of traffic, the railroad passenger was forced to "attune and adapt himself" to the chaotic movement of the train and to "become adept at *soubresauts* and *mouvements brusques*, at sudden, abrupt, jagged twists and shifts—and not only with his legs and his body, *but with his mind and his sensibility as well*" (Berman 159; final emphasis added).<sup>29</sup> The passenger-perceiver caught up in the "world of urban traffic and its culture" was forced into a mental process of "surface appearances, snap judgments, quick studies, and [...] heightened or sharpened perceptions – all leading to fewer collisions, incidents, horrors, and accidents and the resumption of traffic's smooth flow" (Duffy 64).<sup>30</sup> Berman reads mobility-ability into such heightened awareness: "A man who knows how to move in and around and through the traffic can go anywhere, down any of the endless urban corridors where traffic itself is free to go. This

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<sup>29</sup> See Walter Benjamin on the Parisian flâneur, "Paris: Capital of the Nineteenth Century," introduction to the *Arcade Projects* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002).

<sup>30</sup> Duffy reads such cognitive acceleration in detective stories (such as those written by Arthur Conan Doyle), and he draws on Georg Simmel's sociological theories on living in a metropolis. As will be seen, white southerners became engaged in detective work, a product of genealogical policing of the type studied by Grace Hale throughout *Making Whiteness*. As Sherwood Bonner describes the "gossipy old gentlemen" of the fantasy-locale Yariba, Alabama (a hyper-local space) as "the Yariba detectives" in her reflection on reconstruction, 1878's *Like unto Like* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1997), 60. Looking for clues is crucial in Hale's estimation of the surveillance within the railroad traveling Jim Crow South: "Visible cues became increasingly important as markers of identity, as ways to categorize others, as railroads spread traveling pockets of anonymous social relations, more akin to the nation's largest urban centers, across the most isolated areas of the region" (128).

mobility opens up a great wealth of new experiences and activities for the urban masses” (Berman 159-60). However, even as modern speed opened pathways, it also created a fearful response from those attempting to exert sovereignty over the use of those pathways.

Enda Duffy, drawing on Paul Virilio, describes the “territorial state”<sup>31</sup> as a “bunker culture, always implicated, despite its diplomatic rhetoric [*but equal*], in the mentality of the state of siege [*separate*]” (56). Although the “new culture of speed” created new opportunities for empowered flânerie, for “mobility, the crossing of borders, the erasure of stopping points, checkpoints, and entrances and exits [...] and a full-bore freedom of movement,” one finds – in federal railroad regulation and in the Jim Crow legislation of southern states – increasing state involvement, “as traffic manager,” as “the centrifugal point of efficient speed management where it gets its own citizens on the move and tried to exclude the rest. The state controls its roads, its telephone lines, its radio frequencies [...] – all the channels of movement” (Duffy 56-57). During the modern moment of the “railroad revolution,” the rail lines crossing state lines erased the cultural, economic, legal, and genealogical boundaries previously encircling local spaces, and the communities of the South – the region particularly revolutionized by rail – worked through political, cultural, and extralegal channels to inscribe their states’ traffic “infrastructure” with the means to “patrol[] people in movement” (Duffy 57).

The struggle to maintain local order – based on knowing the status of all persons encountered through networks of gossip and family-tree branching – had eroded in the face of modern industrialization and the destruction of local geography, local time, and local

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<sup>31</sup> Duffy and Virilio have in mind the nation-state, but, as will be seen, the efforts of southern states to control intrastate travel (and the resultant web of Jim Crow segregation that spread across the region as a whole) give his reflection states’ rights relevance. As Hale writes, “Railroads did not just regionalize transportation. For whites, they also made clear the need for a state- and region-wide racial order” (128).

populaces.<sup>32</sup> The very sensation of locality was jarred by the railroad, which brought with it the “anxieties” of modern, urban culture: “As on the urban street, strangers on the railway journey sat next to one another, brushed against each other in the aisles, and mingled in stations that in themselves became nodes of urbanity” (Welke 295). Increasing occurrences of physical contact were particularly uncomfortable for members of formerly isolated southern communities, as the railroad severed the individual’s very sense of locality: “Trains moved beyond the reach of personalized local relations of class and racial authority. Most often, travelers found themselves in close proximity to people they did not know, from fellow passengers to line employees, moving through places with which they were not familiar” (Hale 128). The unpredictability of the actions of unfamiliar people in close contact with one another, the need for regularity across a spreading network of working parts, and the prevalence of injuries noted above all created demands for legal regulations:<sup>33</sup>

The structure of railroads and the structure of law created pressure for uniformity. Railroads brought speed and a geographical reach beyond, even defying the concept of, localized communities. These were new factors in American life. They put a premium upon a single, uniform standard of conduct binding on all. In this new world, actors had to be able to anticipate, even assume, how strangers they encountered would act. (Welke 101)<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> “Destruction” seems not too strong a word. Indeed, Schivelbusch has found that “repeatedly,” in the nineteenth century, “the train was described as a projectile” (53). He discusses the railroad’s effect on local space in violent terms: “The speed and mathematical directness with which the railroad proceeds through the terrain *destroy* the close relationship between the traveler and the traveled space” (53; emphasis added). One gets a sense of local time, notably described as an aspect of “identity,” being choked off or physically blocked: “The regions lost their temporal identity in an entirely concrete sense: the railroads *deprived them* of their local time” (42-3; emphasis added).

<sup>33</sup> Welke views this demand and its response as products of the railroad as behavioral vortex: “The very frequency of accidents created the possibility of uniform standards. Railroads and streetcars were repeat actors in a play with a limited number of scenes” (Welke 101). An analogy between train sensation and theatrics was made as early as 1861 by a French travel writer (note again the train’s violence): “Devouring distance at the rate of fifteen leagues an hour, the steam engine, that powerful stage manager, throws the switches, changes the décor, and shifts the point of view every moment; in quick succession it presents the astonished traveler with happy scenes, sad scenes, burlesque interludes, brilliant fireworks [...]; it sets in motion nature clad in all its light and dark costumes” (qtd. in Schivelbusch 61). Thus, the train conductor, in addition to acting as “traffic manager,” acts, in a performative sense, as “stage manager.”

<sup>34</sup> See Alan Trachtenberg’s emphasis on standardization in *The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982). Robert Wiebe, in *The Search for Order*, finds that the regulatory

In this concern for uniformity, from a macro perspective, the U.S. railroad network was machinelike, and its spread carried with it a demand for efficient, predictable operation. Welke makes clear the relationship between mechanical working parts – the railroad engines, tracks, etc. – and *human* working parts – conductors and station agents who “had to be able to anticipate, even assume” the behavior of passengers, the “strangers they encountered.” As Mark Smith describes it in *How Race is Made*, travel by rail “created circumstances where people who could not know one another’s genealogies came into contact on a scale and with a frequency not experienced before in the South. [...] Formerly, in less mobile times, whites just recognized an individual’s race because they knew the individual’s genealogy and history. But old histories evaporated in new faces” (69). So too evaporated the reliability of visibility as a status marker.

This uncomfortable proximity recalls, quite clearly, Du Bois’s concept of strangeness in association with racial identity. And it was precisely this sort of stranger – someone of an undetermined race and ancestry – who attracted the attention of southern communities. What, then, happens to the physical sensations, and responses, of that body when it encounters the hyper-sensations and hyper-dangers of train travel as a body *invested with race*? If the Lumière brothers inspired leaping – a kind of self-defense relying on the mobility of the spectators – the second epigraph, concerning leaps *forced* upon black passengers, registers the experience of a violent interruption of mobility. Welke bases her suspicion on a series of court cases resolving a charge against the Florida East Coast Railway brought by a black man named George Geiger who discovered, after boarding, that the “white” and “colored” cars were not arranged according to normal practice. The conductor *stopped him from moving* through the white car to get to the coach for black passengers, forcing Geiger to step from the moving train, whereupon he was

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“scheme” of the late-nineteenth, early-twentieth century arose “from the [...] needs of urban-industrial life. Through rules with impersonal sanctions, it sought continuity and predictability in a world of endless change” (xiv).

thrown under the wheels. The fall resulted in Geiger's losing two toes and his body being bruised and cut. Welke concludes from the railroad's defense – the conductor being within his legal rights to force a black passenger from the white coach of a moving train – that this was a not uncommon turn of events (51-2). Having begun, then, to think through the sensations inherent to modern spectatorship for a cinema-viewer and railroad-body who “reared up” while watching *Arrival of a Train at the Station*, we might move now to examine the sensations inherent to modern black experience, to the plight of a black man “forced to jump” *away from white space*.

## (B) The Sensation of Segregation Law

*Wheel about, an' turn about, an' do jis so;  
And eb'ry time I wheel about, I jump Jim Crow*

—"Jump Jim Crow" (c. 1830)

*Of mere race feeling we all know there is no scarcity.*

—George Washington Cable, "The Freedman's Case in Equity"

The South's efforts to create de jure segregation might be viewed as a series of innovations, as attempts to apply a system concerned with the mechanics of travel to a system concerned with the sensation of race. As a result, train sensation in the late-nineteenth-century South became bound up with *race sensation*. At one end of the racial sensorium, in the "White Car," white passengers were trying to establish ways to sense race so as to order it. At the other end of the racial sensorium, in the "Colored Car," the bodies and *senses* of dignity of black passengers were made to feel segregation. I will first attend to the system in its spatial-sensorial implementation, and then I will read the sensory effects on black citizens.

Just as Hale's Tours reflects the spectrum of sensory impression involved in the modern experience of space, segregation laws reflect the spectrum of sensory impression involved in the modern experience of race. When Grace Hale reads segregation as reaction to "the shocking *visibility* of the middle-class 'new Negro' on the train"; as reaction to the "*very visible* disjuncture between the consumer as white and the consuming southern black in the image of the middle-class African American riding first class on the train"; and as allowing for the removal of "this troubling figure from *sight*"; she exhibits the role of sensation in modern experience of race and space (Hale 75, 125; emphasis added). But just as travel films were not engaging enough for the increasingly mobile modern subject and needed the accompanying physical sensations of the specially designed train-theater, visual cues were no longer authoritative enough for the



surveillance of increasingly mobile indices of race.<sup>35</sup> And it was the railroad's border-erasure that sparked the need for innovation on both fronts. The train car flooded the senses with novelties difficult to identify, among them the shock of contact with other passengers. The social chaos that ensued drove white southerners to the regulatory apparatus already being applied to, among many other examples, time zones, rail gauge size, and platform lighting.

Railroad safety regulations attempted to reduce the occurrence of the unexpected, and segregation attempted to reduce the contact among racial strangers: "Segregation *made racial identity visible* in a rational and systemic way, despite the anonymity of social relations within train cars. [...] Systemized spatial relations replaced the need to know others personally in order to categorize them" (Hale 130; emphasis added).<sup>36</sup> And, as the regulation of racial movement developed in response to the sensorial maelstrom of modern experience, one finds segregation laws (concern about the way bodies touch one another) associated with mechanical regulation (concern about the way machines touch bodies) (Kelley, *Right* 34). "The havoc created by the lack of a uniform set of rules marking and protecting personal status paralleled the increasing toll in life and limb created by the lack of a uniform set of rules governing interactions with technology more generally. Pressure for uniform rules to safeguard status mirrored pressure for uniform rules to ensure physical safety" (Welke 295).

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<sup>35</sup> Mark Smith gives a sense of the promiscuity wrought by railroads and the sensory effect on southern bodies in *How Race is Made: Slavery, Segregation, and the Senses*. Trains simultaneously introduced *strange* sights, sounds, smells, and bodily touches just as they threw strangers together, "undermin[ing] whites' abilities to read racial identity quickly, reliably, and effectively" (61).

<sup>36</sup> Žižek, in *Violence*, uses a notable metaphor in discussing the antagonism of neighborliness: "Since a Neighbor is, as Freud suspected long ago, primarily a thing, a traumatic intruder, someone whose different way of life [...] disturbs us, *throws the balance of our way of life off the rails*, when it comes too close, this can also give rise to an aggressive reaction aimed at getting rid of this disturbing intruder" (my emphasis, 59). See also "Neighbors and Other Monsters: A Plea for Ethical Violence" in Žižek, Santner and Reinhard, *The Neighbor: Three Inquiries in Political Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

One form of instability, indeed the “primary anxiety” for the Redeemer South, was caused by a “new generation of African Americans [...] [u]nconditioned to positions of inferiority [who] could take advantage of the new urban modes of social and physical mobility that brought them into contact with whites on terms of potential equality” (Abel 5). Grace Hale identifies the discomfort in a mixed-race first-class car less as a fear of ““racial pollution”” than as a shock attendant to “the visible dress and deportment” of black travelers which “belied any notion of southern blacks’ racial inferiority” (Hale 128). The response of southern legislatures was a kind of status protection for white citizens (as part of a larger scheme to protect the white vote and sustain Redeemer governments); segregation laws built boundaries around white southerners in a regulatory move that amounted to a spatial innovation.

The color line bisected the spaces most prone to mobility and encounter: those involved in the “rapidly expanding network of public streetcars, railroads, and buses that carried increasing numbers of people within and between cities” (Abel 4-5). The attention paid to the divisionary spaces created a series of repeat performances by attracting “willing and unwilling alike,” by drawing in as well the attention of spectators. Thus, while train spaces in general represent *behavioral vortices*, the color line itself, as a border, creates a “magnetic force,” drawing the gaze, drawing bodies to gaze upon, to interact with (Roach 28). Although meant to create a site of non-contact, the color line, in this way, is better described by Mary Louise Pratt’s concept of the *contact zone*, as a “social space[] where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power” (33). And, increasingly, the agents of legislative power, the de facto executive branch of segregation law, were employees of the railroad, for whom was left the task of building boundaries amongst increasingly intermingled travelers and across increasingly ephemeral spaces.

The language of the Louisiana Railway Accommodations Act – the legislation under constitutional challenge in *Plessy v. Ferguson* – gives little thought to the identification of racial difference, racial sensibility, but is thorough in consideration of space:

all railway companies carrying passengers in their coaches in this State, shall provide equal but separate accommodations for the white, and colored races, by providing two or more passenger coaches for each passenger train, or by dividing the passenger coaches by a partition so as to secure separate accommodations [...]. No person or persons, shall be permitted to occupy seats in coaches, other than the ones assigned to them on account of the race they belong to. (Section 1, Louisiana Railway Accommodations Act)

It is, indeed, the conductor as “officer” who holds the “power” and responsibility “to assign each passenger to the coach or compartment used for the race to which such passenger belongs” (Section 2, LRAA).<sup>37</sup> Racial designation (“white, and colored”)<sup>38</sup> requires little annotation while the spaces (“companies carrying passengers”; “coaches in this State”; “two or more passenger coaches by each passenger train”; “coaches [divided] by a partition”; “separate accommodations”; “seats in coaches”; “[seats] assigned”) run rampant. It is as though a space for each race *already existed* (“compartment used for the race to which such passenger belongs”), like the seats that preexist a ticket-holding traveler.

When Homer Plessy *took a seat* in a coach provided for passengers “assigned” to the white race, he effected invasion and theft. Of particular importance for Plessy’s legal challenge was the nature of race-assignment and the legislature’s description of race as a matter of “belong[ing].” His legal team, guided by Albion Tourgee, presented an argument that Plessy, owing to his white lineage, owned a seat in the white car.<sup>39</sup> But this line of argumentation is

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<sup>37</sup> Roach describes such assignment as a form of mind reading: “because it could not define what *race* meant, the law in effect deputized conductors of Louisiana to make their own personal judgments, while punching tickets, about what the legislators might possibly have been thinking when they said ‘white’ and ‘colored races’” (236).

<sup>38</sup> The comma here seems excessive and might be read as a typographic separation where “and” alone would conjoin.

<sup>39</sup> “Tourgee argued that the separate car law gave Plessy’s right to self-chosen identity to train conductors, who arbitrarily assigned passengers to one car or another based on personal judgment” (Kelley, *Right* 80).

dodged in favor of spatial reasoning by the majority opinion of the Supreme Court in upholding Louisiana's legal language. Justice Henry Brown writes for the eight-to-one majority: "Laws permitting, and even requiring, [the races'] *separation in places where they are liable to be brought into contact* do not necessarily imply the inferiority of either race to the other, and have been generally, if not universally, recognized as within the competency of the state legislatures in the exercise of their police power" (Plessy 544; emphasis added).<sup>40</sup> In this way, the Supreme Court illustrates the magnetic force of the color line as behavioral vortex in its hyper-attentive, and hyper-attended to, role as spatial response to southern anxiety about unregulated "contact."

Justice Brown designates the legislature's perception of such contact, and its ability to introduce order, to fall under local understanding (another kind of spatial reasoning) of culture and custom, concepts attached to spatial – rather than racial – management: "In determining the question of reasonableness [the state legislature] is at liberty to act [through police power] with reference to the established usages, customs and traditions of the people, and with a view to the promotion of their *comfort*, and the preservation of the public peace and *good order*" (550; emphasis added). The upholding of Louisiana's desire for "separation," "comfort," and "good order" highlights the body's location in space as *the* issue to be resolved. Modern movement was increasingly chaotic and novel, particularly in the train car, and the imposition of Jim Crow laws

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<sup>40</sup> This response specifically deals with the defendant's challenge on Fourteenth Amendment grounds. The "object" of that amendment, the *Plessy* court deems, "was undoubtedly to enforce the absolute equality of the two races before the law, but in the nature of things it could not have been intended to abolish distinctions based upon color, or to enforce social, as distinguished from political equality, or a commingling of the two races upon terms unsatisfactory to either" (544). However, in a post-Reconstruction South striving to disenfranchise black voters, the allowance to states for spatial control via police power was, in fact, extended to voting sites. Blair Kelley discusses the Fifteenth Amendment's *specific* provision for voting rights for black citizens, noting that Louisiana, in particular, was "a state where the massacre of more than one hundred black voters in rural Colfax in 1873 went unpunished. In dismissing the conviction of the Colfax murderers in *United States v. Cruikshank et al.* (1876), the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that it was up to the states, not the federal government, to make voting a functioning right. The Fifteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution had given the freedmen the right to vote; the Supreme Court ruled that the amendment had simply *removed the barrier* and did not imply federal enforcement of the right to vote, abandoning black citizens in rural areas like the parishes of Louisiana to the will of local authorities" (*Right* 63-64; emphasis added). Again, a spatial concept opens up in the language of the Court in regards to racial adjudication.

responded to the body's promiscuity within a modern sensorium, even as the laws highlighted the color line as a contact zone.

The name given to the space that regulated, by containment, "colored" identity and behavior, "Jim Crow," points up white panic over contact with mobile black bodies.<sup>41</sup> In his article "Right to Ride: African American Citizenship and Protest in the Era of *Plessy v. Ferguson*," Blair Kelley finds in the antebellum performances of Thomas "Daddy" Rice an archetypal "Jim Crow," a figure who was "a traveling intruder, a black interloper in all white spaces." "Jim Crow was an insistent traveler [who] could frequently be found riding in otherwise elegant trains, streetcars, and steamboats" (347). This misfit identity (made doubly so in its blackface incarnation) obtains power to *discomfort* audiences (startled into laughter) through the character's self-furnished license to roam – or dance – into *any space*.<sup>42</sup> However, when legislatures deemed it necessary to promote "comfort" and "good order," the Supreme Court finds legal grounds for barrier building. Segregated coach laws seek to capture Jim Crow, "to prevent the kind of transgression of the social order that the character [...] committed in minstrel performances," and to capture the name itself (originally used in the singing games of slave children) through metonymy: "The name Jim Crow became synonymous with the inferior, racially segregated train cars designated for black passengers, [...] the place to shunt black

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<sup>41</sup> The name was first attached to segregated spaces in the antebellum North, and its migration to the post-war South bears reading with Žižek in mind: "So, perhaps, the fact that *reason* and *race* have the same root in Latin (*ratio*) tells us something: language, not primitive egotistic interest, is the first and greatest divider, it is because of language that we and our neighbours (can) 'live in different worlds' even when we live on the same street. What this means is that verbal violence is not a secondary distortion, but the ultimate resort of every specifically human violence" (*Violence* 66). Thus, for Žižek, the role of the Jim Crow figure, in its tradition from (frightening) buffoon to legalized, physically demarcating stereotype, is that of the "true target" and "fantasmatic dimension" of the racist's "fury" (67).

<sup>42</sup> W. T. Lhamon describes the machine-like momentum and *promiscuity* of lyrical Jim Crow: "T. D. Rice would sing and dance the song, then pretend to try to stop; his audience would demand multiple encores. The song was unstable in every way. Its few core verses continuously changed [...]. The chorus was always fully half the song and embodied the need to leap out of itself" (93). Indeed, the printed version of "Jump Jim Crow" performs, sixty years before the Louisiana statute, the inability of texts to pin the figure: "rather than providing an authoritative text, the printed versions increased the song's flux by modeling its improvisation. The half-dozen examples of the song's earliest printed variants [...] emphasize their variety and frequent contentions" (Lhamon 93).

passengers; a place where the ‘uncivilized negro’ of white imaginations could be prevented from mingling with whites” (Kelley, “Right” 347).<sup>43</sup> It is merely one more metonymic step for the name to attach to passengers of those cars, who become “colored” – costumed as such, even – by virtue of their placement.

Elizabeth Abel, in her study of segregation signs, *Signs of the Times: The Visual Politics of Jim Crow*, finds in “the spatialization of race” a “strategy” intended to “stabilize race in space as an antidote to modernization” (19). However, modernization presented a moving target, and Abel argues that spatially assigned race “unsettled some of the distinctions it was designed to stabilize. Unlike a determinate, invariant racial identity written in blood, skin, and bones and carried as baggage everywhere one went, the passage through diverse locations subjected individuals to multiform constructions of race” (19). Train passengers, in particular, in view of laws like Louisiana’s, were less carriers of race than carried by race. Further, as the two sets of epigraphs above illustrate, the train passenger was a figure jostled and thrown, turning and leaping. As indicated by the history of Jim Crow, the train traveling body was enmeshed in a performative exchange, and the train car set, from multiple perspectives, was a *mise en scène*.

James Weldon Johnson’s novel *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912) illustrates the kind of “passage” and “multiform constructions of race” noted by Abel. The original edition, indeed, was published anonymously and so performs, in its very appearance in print, evanescent identity. I will read this performance in full in Chapter III, but for now the text marks a useful point from which to sketch the railroad as site for “strange” performances of race. The moving train, a location ever passing through locations, is an ideal place for the exhibition of racial identity as, itself, a transitory phenomenon. The reader of the 1912 *Autobiography*, before

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<sup>43</sup> As mentioned above, this was an anxiety tied to the train as sexualized space. “As one judge argued, racial segregation helped ‘prevent contacts and collisions’ that came from ‘a promiscuous sitting’” (Kelley, “Right” 347).

embarking on its narrative, encounters a “Preface” indicating the nature of the text: “These pages [...] reveal the unsuspected fact that prejudice against the Negro is exerting a pressure, which, in New York and other large cities where the *opportunity is open*, is actually and *constantly forcing an unascertainable number* of fair-complexioned colored people *over into the white race*” (xxxiv; emphasis added). In addition to being made to face the effect of the socio-political “force” of racism, one is immediately confronted (as an “unsuspect[ing]” reader) by a concept of race as a species of movement, and one is alerted to the idea that such movement takes place in and across open spaces. The book itself is in motion across bibliographic spaces: the title, typically a stabilizing feature in its naming function, gives a startling sense of instability, for the anonymous “autobiographer” has *already left* one racial identity and writes from the location of another (*Ex-*); the false genre marking, a novel costumed – passing – as an autobiography, further extends the air of uncertainty.

The preface, attributed to “The Publishers,” does little to clear the air but does warn the reader of imminent performance by situating the text in terms of dramatic spectacle, concluding: “In this book the reader is given a glimpse behind the scenes of this race-drama which is being here enacted, —he is taken upon an elevation where he can catch a bird’s-eye view of the conflict which is being waged” (xxxiv).<sup>44</sup> The narrative has thus been framed as a performance of movement between spaces, movement at once visible (“bird’s-eye view”) and beyond reckoning (“an unascertainable number of fair-complexioned people”). Although the publishers promise the reader a safe (and stationary) seat “upon an elevation” from which to view the staged action, Johnson’s *Autobiography* unfolds in a manner thoroughly modern, from a vantage point better conceptualized as an early travel film viewed within a Hale’s Tour car, allowing us to enter the

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<sup>44</sup> William Andrews, editor of the 1990 edition of the *Autobiography* used throughout this thesis, grants Johnson some measure of authorship for the “Preface,” noting that “it reflects almost verbatim the ideas and wording that Johnson recommended be used as a preface to his novel in a February 2, 1912, letter to his publisher” (xxx).

Jim Crow car.<sup>45</sup> It is a novel of movement, with a narrator passing through the events of his life and “passing” among racial identities.<sup>46</sup> The reader, indeed, watches from an unprotected zone, “behind the scenes.”

Just as the *Autobiography*'s events are at once “race-drama” and a “conflict [...] being waged,” Robin D. G. Kelley calls the interior spaces of southern transportation “moving theaters,” employing both meanings of theater, as site of dramaturgical and militaristic action: “dramas of conflict, repression, and resistance are performed in which passengers witness, or participate in, a wide variety of ‘skirmishes’ that shape their collective memory, illustrate the limitations as well as possibilities of resistance to domination, and draw more passengers into the ‘performance’” (*Rebels* 57).<sup>47</sup> Kelley indicates the way, again, that we might read these spaces as vortices of behavior. The battle line, drawn as color line, draws in combatants/actors – produces performers – and audience members, especially as more passengers are pulled together more often by the increasing use of public transportation. The innovative social site itself, as space at once *open* and watched, demands a dramatic spectacle. Whereas Roach and Kelley attempt to read the performances as they occur in situ, I am attuned to a more fluid railroad performance of the male African-American passenger, like that of Johnson’s “ex-colored man,” not on a single

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<sup>45</sup> One might infer that the modern spectator would not, indeed, be satisfied viewing the events in the ex-colored man’s life from the safety of a “bird’s-eye view,” although he/she might not object to being “taken upon an elevation” (as the appearance of the early century rollercoaster exhibits). Johnson’s readership was made up of railroad bodies and filmic eyes becoming accustomed to, and desirous of, being moved and watching moving pictures.

<sup>46</sup> “Passing,” the act of moving from a black identity to a white one according to one’s ambiguous skin tone, was in its “great age” from 1880-1925 (Smith 7). The performative activity, thus, is a modern one, at least in so far as “passing” presented itself to the American popular imagination. I am interested in the ways passing is employed or gestured toward, this latter applying to Homer Plessy. Grace Hale writes of the ambiguity left in the wake of the *Plessy* decision, calling upon Du Bois’ concept of double consciousness: “How [Plessy] could merge his ‘double self,’ how he could deal with his specific embodiment of a not always so literal biracial cultural heritage the Court did not say” (23). She calls upon Albert Murray’s phrase, the “‘incontestably mulatto’ nature of American culture,” to claim that the Supreme Court “set this lie at the very center of modern society” (23).

<sup>47</sup> Kelley’s reading political protest into the rebellious activities of 1930s and 1940s Birmingham streetcar and bus passengers and his use of Scott’s “hidden transcripts” and “infrapolitics,” although divergent from this thesis in the specifics of subject matter, has a great deal of bearing on my current work (see 35-76 in *Rebels*).



ride but expressing an ongoing lived experience. Thus, I find critical purchase, not only in theater's double meaning, but in a double meaning derived from "moving" (i.e. *passing*) as well.

Johnson's ex-colored man, in his passing and passages, is very much a flâneur, and the novel presents him as a modern subject *learning how to move*.<sup>48</sup> The narrator begins with an account of his youth – in proper autobiographical form – that includes a move from South to North, recalled amongst the "dim recollection[s]" of early childhood. He and his mother leave their Georgia home, a trip prompted and paid for by the ex-colored man's white father. The journey begins with a train ride during which the child "knelt on the seat and watched through the train window the corn and cotton fields pass swiftly by" (3). His initiation into modern movement thus illustrates the intended effect of a cinematic panorama (the visual side of Hale's Tours): something perceived as a spectacle – in this case fields full of crops identifying the region as southern – and passing (a term profoundly inflected with race) "swiftly by." The child puts himself in a proper position to be able to see the sight, and it figures into his sense of movement and transition, the beginning of a journey he recalls feeling "endless" (3).

The family settles in Connecticut, where the ex-colored man spends his boyhood. The play of memory sparked by the sole, sudden, and spellbinding appearance of his father runs in the child's mind (or, more precisely, in the language he later uses to illustrate the "spell") as a filmstrip in the cinema: "then it seemed that indistinct and partly obliterated films of memory began, at first slowly, then rapidly, to unroll, forming a vague *panorama* of my childhood days in Georgia" (22; emphasis added). Such a description is perhaps anachronistic (at least in terms of a

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<sup>48</sup> Berman makes an overt connection between the flâneur and the modern dancer: "the life of modern dance was striving to assimilate the street" (318-19). See Susan Manning's *Modern Dance, Negro Dance: Race in Motion* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004) for a study of African American dancers assimilating modern life.

*cinematic* panorama)<sup>49</sup> for the child to have made – the vague timeframe of the novel sets the scene in the 1880s – but the narrator, taken as writing from the time of publication, 1912, would have cinema experience at his descriptive disposal.<sup>50</sup> The salient point here is that “vague” sensory impressions like those from early childhood – sparked in this case by the appearance of the father’s “elegant polished shoes” (22) – take on modern modes of expression for the modern subject. The visual, external sense of motion is linked with an internal sense of emotion. A shock to the child’s system takes on the processing of a scene sliding past out of a railcar’s window, or a film reeling past on a cinema screen. This, for Johnson as for his narrator, is a decidedly modern move made in response to a modern way of life.

Crucial to my argument, and to Johnson’s novelistic account, is the way region gets expressed in modern modes of communication, like the railroad window and movie screen. The fields perceived in childhood play again through the window of a train speeding the eighteen-year-old ex-colored man back to Georgia for college: “I peered through the car windows, looking in vain for the luxuriant semi-tropical scenery which I had pictured in my mind. [...] Instead, the red earth partly covered by tough, scrawny grass, the muddy, straggling roads, the cottages of unpainted pine boards, and the clay-daubed huts imparted a ‘burnt-up’ impression” (37).<sup>51</sup> This is a South that collides with a childhood memory, and it contains in it the markings of violence

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<sup>49</sup> Calling on Schivelbusch’s concept of “panoramic perception,” Lynne Kirby discusses the relation between the (non-cinematic) panorama (“an eighteenth-century invention that was the virtual reality experience of its day”) and the new perception of space experienced by mid-nineteenth-century train travelers. Cinematic panorama, however, “include[d] a changed temporal consciousness – an orientation to synchronicity and simultaneity embodied in the railroads’ institutionalization of standard time in 1883” (7). Likewise, the way that memory jumps in time and connects associated impressions in Johnson’s *Autobiography*, particularly in the railroad scenes, calls attention to the (modern) perspectival ability of the ex-colored man to assess passing space and time – which, in turn, calls attention to his ability to pass in terms of body, region, and identity.

<sup>50</sup> For a discussion of the novel’s “intermediality” (after Bill Brown’s phrase in *The Material Unconscious* (Cambridge, 1996)) see Jacqueline Goldsby, “Keeping the Secret of Authorship: A Critical Look at the 1912 Publication of James Weldon Johnson’s *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*.”

<sup>51</sup> There is clear resonance here with Du Bois’s description of Georgia in the “Of the Black Belt Chapter” in *The Souls of Black Folk* (a work influential on Johnson’s, even cited by the narrator [123]): “Out of the North the train thundered, and we woke to see the crimson soil of Georgia stretching away bare and monotonous right and left. Here and there lay straggling, unlovely villages” (*Souls* 75).

(“red earth” and “‘burnt up’ impression”) that the ex-colored man witnesses towards the end of his account, during a third and final trip to Georgia.

The visual language of violence becomes actual (the non-visual side of Hale’s Tours), spatially demarcated violence as a consequence of attempts at southern mobility by a black passenger in the novel. Although in a position of free mobility – as a stow-away passenger (a kind of hobo) on a luxurious Pullman car – the ex-colored man takes a train ride from Atlanta to Florida in a state of extreme discomfort. The space assigned to him by a collaborating Pullman porter contains the jolts and shifts of a Hale’s Tours car but of a heightened variety: “I may live to be a hundred years old, but I shall never forget the agonies I suffered that night. [...] The air was hot and suffocating and the smell [...] sickening. At each lurch of the car over the none-too-smooth track I was bumped and bruised against the narrow walls of my narrow compartment” (46-7).<sup>52</sup> The flâneur-like ex-colored man – his traveling often begins spontaneously, in response to an unexpected stimulation – experiences a world of fleeting impressions and harsh “lurches” which, when read through his performance of strange racial identity, illustrates the speed and violence inherent to the sensation of modern transportation in relation to the color line. Before reading the ex-colored man’s railroad performance, however, one must zoom in on the sensation of rail travel for a black passenger during segregation. Such a “backstage” picture will reveal the deep ambivalence – alluded to above – of modern life in the South.<sup>53</sup>

It is worth reiterating here the concept of the railroad dialectic between experience and expression. For, as we move, with Dr. Du Bois, into the Jim Crow car, the exchange between *feeling* and *feelings* requires greater attention. Having discussed the feeling of train travel during

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<sup>52</sup> These descriptions evoke, under Baker’s reading in *Turning South Again*, the middle passage.

<sup>53</sup> Žižek’s notion of subjective violence is useful in reading the systemic force that bound black Americans to post-Reconstruction suffering: “We’re talking here of the violence inherent in a system: not only direct physical violence (subjective), but also the more subtle forms of coercion that sustain relations of domination and exploitation, including the threat of violence (objective)” (*Violence* 9).

the railroad revolution, a mixture of novelty-induced exhilaration and discomfort, I now turn my attention to the feelings of black train passengers caught up in the southern regulatory scheme of train segregation. Thus far I have examined the turn-of-the-century American body in motion: now that body gets assigned a seat. For, in addition to being hurtled through space, black passengers were herded into Jim Crow cars where they were confronted with signs and sensations of inferiority. As products of legal regimes, these train cars are constructed by legislative acts, and so it is worthwhile to reencounter the legal material involved in the railroad-sensation of race.

The “separate” component of “separate but equal” relies on the ability of railroad employees to assign race to passengers via a process of compartmentalization. The “equal” component relies on the ability of railroad companies to supply equivalent travel experiences to two sets of bodies. In the legal literature surrounding Jim Crow laws, represented here by the Louisiana Railway Accommodations Act [LRAA] and the Supreme Court’s scrutiny of that law in *Plessy*, the process of separation is given the weight of concern while equality is taken as given, as not needing further discussion.<sup>54</sup> The *Plessy* court shows a complete disregard for the possibility that train travel could involve a feeling of insult. Justice Brown, writing the majority’s opinion, states: “We consider the underlying fallacy of the plaintiff’s argument to consist in the assumption that the enforced separation of the two races *stamps the colored race with a badge of inferiority*. If this be so, it is not by reason of anything found in the act, but solely because the colored race chooses to put that construction upon it” (552; emphasis added).<sup>55</sup> Thus, the Court

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<sup>54</sup> One might go so far as to read the Louisiana Railway Accommodations Act’s ordering the familiar phrase in reverse, “equal but separate,” as closing off consideration of the former while opening up consideration of the meaning and process of separation.

<sup>55</sup> The Court attempts to divide a social realm from the Constitutional rights mandated for the political realm, though the two were clearly mixed for segregating southern communities: “North Carolina’s first Jim Crow railway measure (1899) was enacted in the midst of the drive within the state to disenfranchise blacks [...]. For the region as a whole, not only did racist agitation flourish but race separation fitted conveniently with Progressive-era ideals of

dodges the possibility that there is something inherently inferior or stamping about the Jim Crow cars – or indeed about the process of separation. In his dissent, Justice Harlan is quick to point out the fallacy of such thinking: “The thin disguise of ‘equal’ accommodations for passengers in railroad coaches will not mislead any one, nor atone for the wrong this day done” (562).<sup>56</sup> An examination of the sensation of being assigned a space, a species of *feelings*, and of the sensations within that space, *feeling*, exposes the doubly jarring experience of “separate but equal.”

For Mark Smith the construction of inferiority is not a misreading by black passengers but a thoroughly intentional component of southern regimes: “Segregation aimed to construct and then fix ideas of absolute racial difference by locating black and white bodies in different spaces, spaces with different social and political values and meanings” (50). And, for Smith, the senses were crucial to the process by which “southern whites reduced blacks to a position in which segregation seemed natural and essential” (49). If Homer Plessy’s uncertain racial position points up the difficulty of visually reading race, the southern communities attempting to impose certainty on the influx of train passengers, *passing* into and out again, relied on marking spaces, and so the elusive bodies within them, with an array of sensorial markers. Segregation law was an effort “to combat [racial] uncertainty[,] to profile the visual, to shout the sights of race, to keep pummeling away at seen race” (Smith 71).

The sensorial anxiety inherent to such a project is made clear if we return to the train scene in Chesnutt’s *The Marrow of Tradition*. Dr. Miller, who has escaped segregation for the

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social efficiency and progress” (Lofgren 203). This is the law encountered by William Miller in *Marrow*: “the law had been in operation only a few months” (Chesnutt 80).

<sup>56</sup> As Lofgren notes, the assumption of equality between accommodations does provide a “‘promising’ side to *Plessy*,” a “formula” which “could be invoked against the worst deprivations.” He points to *McCabe v. Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe* (1914) [235 U.S. 151] as an indication that “the Supreme Court [...] in properly developed cases [...] would indeed hold intrastate railways to the standard of equality of service.” “Blacks, both individually and especially through the [NAACP], used legal action to complicate and make more costly the enforcement of separation, by holding common carriers to the standard of real equality in facilities” (201).

northern leg of his southbound journey, suddenly finds himself under the surveillance of the conductor and a man whom he recognizes from his North Carolina hometown, Captain McBane. The nearly physical impact of the surveillance is clear in Chesnutt's language: in McBane's "single gray eye [which] swept Miller [...] with a scornful glance" and in Miller's "brac[ing] himself for what he feared was coming" (77). Miller is forced to leave the company of Dr. Burns and the comfort of the first class car, but the southerner assures his northern companion, "it's only for a little while. I'll reach my destination just as surely in the other car" (79). The possibility for an equal ("just as surely") ride, however, is undone as soon as William Miller is separated into "the *other*" space:

The car was conspicuously labeled at either end with large cards [bearing] the word "Colored" in black letters upon a white background. The author of this piece of legislation had contrived [...] that not merely should the passengers be separated by the color line, but that the reason for this division *should be kept constantly in mind*. [...] [S]hould a colored person endeavor, for a moment, to lose sight of his disability, these staring signs would remind him continually that between him and the rest of mankind not of his own color, there was by law a great gulf fixed. (Chesnutt 79; emphasis added)

The "pummeling" is clear: Miller braces himself for the move as though for a blow and encounters what Smith would call "shouting signs," and he later refers to the "brutal drawing of the color line" (82). The signs in *Marrow* create a sensation of exclusion, visual, auditory, and physical, that accompanies the spatialization of race, an array of sensations "kept constantly in mind."

For Elizabeth Abel, who studies "Jim Crow signage" in a variety of contexts, segregation signs "sought [...] to command, humiliate, and ingratiate" and "gave race a graphic body that shaped the meaning of its abstract terms" (5). Such inscriptions were efforts at physically fixing the protean workings of genealogy. Further, as efforts to mark space – an element blurred and

destabilized by a speeding train – the signs were an attempt “to write race” on increasingly indeterminate zones of social activity (Abel 6).<sup>57</sup> The signs signal an attempt to control the racial sensorium and to order society through a hierarchy of feelings. It is as much being forced into this space as the space itself that causes offense to the segregated passenger. Chesnutt, through Miller, indicates this fact with a “rough calculation” of what “separate but equal” costs southern railroads: “It was expensive, to say the least; it would be cheaper, and quite as considerate of their *feelings*, to make the negroes walk” (Chesnutt 79; emphasis added). Although this statement draws on hyperbole, its terms highlight the workings of de jure segregation, a system engaged in touching the bodies and insulting the dignity of African Americans by fiat. Johnson’s ex-colored man makes a similar point when he informs the reader of “the humiliation of being made to ride in a *particular* car, aside from the fact that the car is distinctly inferior” (59).<sup>58</sup> As we examine the sensory assault of the conditions within the Jim Crow car, it is important to keep in mind the way that “Colored” signs and the process of separation force an association between those conditions and the persons so marked. After all, the railroad was a stage, the passengers traveled in the public light, as Du Bois insists: “Probably no phase of discrimination has irked the American Negro more than the so-called ‘Jim Crow’ cars for travel, because of its publicly insulting character” (“Race” 243).

The emphatically unequal conditions of “White” and “Colored” train car arose in part from the “interposed” situation of railroads between the racial communities (Welke 364). The partitions between rail cars became physical manifestations of the color line; train conductors

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<sup>57</sup> “The same principle applies to every political protest: when workers protest their exploitation, they do not protest a simple reality, but an experience of their real predicament made meaningful through language” (Zizek 67). “So precisely when we are dealing with the scene of a furious crowd, attacking and burning buildings and cars, lynching people, etc., we should never forget the placards they are carrying and the words which sustain and justify their acts” (Zizek 67).

<sup>58</sup> Du Bois echoes this sentiment about the Jim Crow car during his train trip to Georgia in *Souls*: “Of course this car is not so good as the other, but it is fairly clean and comfortable. The discomfort lies chiefly in the hearts of these four black men yonder – and in mine” (76).

became color line drawers. And, as Chesnutt indicates above, the financial onus for creating equal conditions rested with the railroad companies who were eager to shirk the load.<sup>59</sup> The product of neglect was sensory discomfort and disrespect, a point made clearly by the evolution of names for the segregated train cars of antebellum Massachusetts, from the “dirt car” in 1835 to the “Jim Crow car” in 1841 (Kornweibel 238). Here we find the *national* roots of segregation and a clear example of the way *de jure* systems were attempted by southern communities “to capture and legitimate a caricatured view of race” (Smith 71). Jim Crow, no longer jumping at will between cars, was captured and made to stand in as the caricatured identity for all who shared his space, a space with a history of filth.

In the Jim Crow cars of the late-century South, too, one finds an excess of dirt. Dr. Miller is made to inhabit “an old car, with faded upholstery, from which the stuffing projected here and there through torn places,” with a floor that appears not to have been “swept for several days,” with “dust [...] thick upon the window sills,” and a “water-cooler [...] filled with stale water which had made no recent acquaintance with ice” (Chesnutt 79). And the forced association between himself and the quality of the car is not lost on Miller: “he very naturally resented being [...] branded and tagged and set apart from the rest of mankind upon the public highways, like an unclean thing” (80). Similar imagery of the shameful state of second-class cars and shamed feelings appears with emphatic frequency in the discourse of train passengers, white and black, from the time period. George Washington Cable, a white Louisianan, authored one of the more

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<sup>59</sup> “The provisions of Jim Crow statutes requiring equal accommodations for the races were usually mere statements that kept the laws within constitutional bounds. Once the carriers discovered that these clauses would not be enforced, they minimized the cost of segregation by supplying black with second-rate facilities” (Barnes 15). Welke points out that the legal responsibility was similarly shifted to corporate shoulders and that, as a result, the same slightly-empowering upside noticed by Lofgren was created: “By holding the railroad responsible for the actions of whites on their trains, courts interpreting statutory Jim Crow [...] made it possible for African-Americans to challenge the kind of white insult, intimidation, and violence that in other settings went unredressed” (364-5).



disseminated of such complaints, “The Freedman’s Case in Equity” (1885), on behalf of black citizens.<sup>60</sup>

Segregation sensation cuts two ways for Cable: it “blunts the sensibilities of the ruling class” (those intended to sense the difference between the races), and, in the process, it “makes the average Southern railway coach more uncomfortable than the average railway coaches elsewhere” (24). Cable *senses* the black passenger as “marked off,” as “menial”: “Not by railings and partitions merely, [...] but by giving him besides, in every instance and without recourse, the most uncomfortable, uncleanest, and unsafest place” (26-27). For Cable, the class marking that attaches to (stamps, brands, tags) a black mother and child does not derive from fashion or behavior – they are “neatly and tastefully dressed” and “very still and quiet” – but from their being seated in the car that also accommodates a chain gang who “packed it full,” who made it a “foul hole” that “stank insufferably” (29). Thus we watch a collision between clean and quiet and “filthy [...] with vile odors” and “clanking of shackles and chains” (29).<sup>61</sup> Note that in the midst of the color line vortex (a space that draws Cable’s careful attention), the senses are bombarded with the sight, sound, smell, and feeling of oppression.

Giggie describes two types of African-American accommodations and two types of sensorial assault: “the baggage car [...] located directly behind the engine, swirled with smoke, soot, sparks, and embers”; “the smoking car [...] designated [...] for men of any color or class to

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<sup>60</sup> Cable gives an idea of the volume of Jim Crow car complaint discourse, telling his reader that his “desk is covered” with letters from freedmen describing outrages to their bodies and dignities (27). In tracing the postbellum arc of the southern freedmen through Reconstruction into Redemption (“from slavery to freedom, from freedom to citizenship, [...] into political ascendancy, and fallen again from that eminence”), Cable finds that the “letter of the laws” has “heap[ed] upon [the freedman] in every public place the most odious distinctions” (2, 18). It was the Jim Crow car that provided the evidence for his case against segregation, forty years before Du Bois makes the same point, for the car was a site of severe “public indignities” (18).

<sup>61</sup> It is striking that Cable is moved more by the involuntary chaining of the mother and child to the wretched car than the treatment of the chain gang (who were the original focus of his “case”). He also makes much of the fact that a “menial” black passenger would be allowed to ride in the first-class (or ladies’) car, a species of the “confusion” inherent to the system (24).

puff cigars, swig whisky, play cards, and rough house” (39). Welke describes the ““colored’ compartment” as “dirty and dark” and “filled with smoke from two directions: the engine and the smoking compartment” (272). From these historical accounts (chosen among a very great number) it is clear that a segregative regulatory scheme already in place, the “smoking car” set aside for men to produce sensations deemed unfit for a “ladies’ car,” creates a striking sensory contrast between supposedly equal spaces.<sup>62</sup> The Jim Crow cars, legal creations, were notably lawless zones, usually described in violent terms. Many complaints were made by upwardly mobile black passengers who were thrown in with passengers deemed – because of the kinds of sartorial and temperamental markings noted by Cable – outlandish. These were spaces of neglected amenities, but the acts upon the senses by other passengers give license to my use of the phrase “sensorial assault.”<sup>63</sup>

Although William Miller’s initial experience of the “Colored” car illustrates the railroad company’s neglect and a sensation of indignity, the true assault begins with the entrance of Captain McBane, who illegally crosses the color line to smoke in the black car. Chesnutt thereby shows at once the subordinate position built into the “colored” side of “separate but equal” and the “smoking car” experience of black passengers, fully capturing the dialectic of feeling and feelings.<sup>64</sup> McBane refuses to leave, telling the conductor, who previously ejected Miller from

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<sup>62</sup> Ayers paints the following picture of the feeling of riding Jim Crow: “The floors were thick with spit and tobacco juice, the air thick with smoke and vulgarities. [It] had hard seats, low ceilings, and no water [...] and was often invaded by smoke and soot” (Ayers 137). Such a sensorial assault was ignored by the *Plessy* court, perhaps in part because the plaintiff’s cooperative railroad company, that financially burdened intermediary, was not willing to shoulder the responsibility for the state of the car: “Tourgee hoped to present photographic evidence of conditions on the Jim Crow car [on the Louisville and Nashville Railroad car], but when he asked if pictures could be taken, the railroad refused, fearful of future liability given the unequal condition of colored cars” (Kelley, *Right* 75).

<sup>63</sup> Ayers quotes a Louisiana man’s complaint about a trip to Texas, ““The Cars were jammed, all the way over here, with the dirtiest, nastiest set I ever rode with”” (137). Kornweibel describes an abattoir of tobacco byproducts: “Spit and tobacco juice covered the floor, despoiled the seats, and even decorated the ceilings. The air was rank with cigar smoke and vulgarities. One white traveler pronounced such cars ‘absolutely uninhabitable’” (240).

<sup>64</sup> McBane’s invasion reinforces the sensorial hierarchy discussed by Mark Smith: “The point about segregation is not that it was a system of complete separation; the point is that whites derived their authority by defining when and where sensory intimacy was permitted” (50). Hale discusses such border jumping as an aspect of southern whites’

McBane's car, "I'll leave this car when I get good and ready, and that won't be till I've finished the cigar. See?" (80). The resulting assault on the senses is palpable: "The white man had spread himself over two seats, and was smoking vigorously, from time to time spitting carelessly in the aisle[;] having thrown the stump of his cigar into the aisle and added to the floor a finishing touch in the way of expectoration, [McBane] rose and went back into the white car" (80).<sup>65</sup> Here is an attack on the sensory organs of the kind Cable's "Freedman's Case" harps upon, a sensorial assault of the type in evidence in the historical accounts. The behavior of McBane, and the filth he leaves in Miller's car, attaches to Miller – it is a zone of undignified behavior where he is made to belong.

Whereas McBane exerts excessive mobility, Miller is pinioned to the Jim Crow space. In addition to the sensorial unpleasantness of that space, there is the heightened "unsafety" mentioned by Cable. Indeed, danger is just as much inscribed into the Jim Crow car as dirt. The law provided (though did not always protect) the power of expulsion for conductors seeking to maintain the color line. As the conductor tells a protesting Dr. Burns,

"The law gives me the right to remove [Miller] by force. I can call on the train crew to assist me, or on the other passengers. If I should choose to put him off the train entirely, in the middle of a swamp, he would have no redress – the law so provides. If I did not wish to use force, I could simply switch this car off at the next siding, transfer the white passengers to another, and leave you and your friend in possession until you were arrested and fined or imprisoned." (78)

Here we have an explanation of the George Geiger case noted at the end of section (A), legal support for throwing a black passenger from a moving train. We also have a potential expulsion

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project of "making whiteness": "whites made modern racial meaning not just by creating boundaries but also by crossing them. Containing the mobility of others allowed whites to put on blackface, to play with and project upon darkness, to let whiteness float free. These transgressions characterized and broadened modern whiteness, increasing its invisibility and its power" (8).

<sup>65</sup> Note also the (modern) sensorial impact of McBane's clothing, which Chesnutt subjects to a Cable-style critique: "[He] wore a frock coat and a slouch hat; several buttons of his vest were unbuttoned, and his solitaire diamond blazed in his soiled shirt-front like the headlight of a locomotive" (77). Meanwhile Miller has been described as being "well dressed" (if his "gentleman" dresses companion with a "little more distinction") (74).

into an unsafe space – the middle of a swamp – or the dangerous unplanned deposit of the train at a siding. The enforcement provision of the LRAA, and the Supreme Court’s approval thereof, put the violence of subjecting a body to the speed of modern conveyances in the hands of railroad employees.<sup>66</sup>

Danger lurked inside the cars as well, a result of the particular placement of Jim Crow cars: “A custom developed early of placing baggage cars right behind the locomotive, in part to serve as buffers for the passenger cars should a collision or boiler explosion occur. A parallel custom thus evolved, in which Jim Crow cars were coupled closest to the locomotive, therefore exposing their occupants to greater danger and more smoke and cinders” (Kornweibel 238). These customs coupled with financial shortcuts taken by railroad companies that left African Americans unprotected, their bodies (as opposed to their senses of dignity) exposed to the unyielding modern materials used in construction of the first-class cars:

Not only was it customary to assign older, more decrepit, less comfortable cars for use by blacks, but in the early 1900s, as railroads replaced many wooden passenger cars with new steel cars (or added steel underframes to wooden cars), travel in unmodified wooden cars became all the more dangerous. When collisions occurred, steel cars telescoped through wooden cars, killing many passengers in the latter, while, relatively speaking, sparing those in the heavier sturdier cars. (Kornweibel 245)

As discussed above, the senses were overwrought, not just by the violence of a collision, but by the shock of a near-miss as well. A petition by such a passenger (on a North Carolina train) complained:

“not only [are we] assigned the most dangerous portion of the train [directly behind the locomotive and head-end cars], but we are forced to ride in the weakest coaches that make up the train. Because of this, some of us have lost friends and kinsmen in wrecks, while the other passengers in the same train, but in stronger coaches, were not damaged enough to need hospital attention. For this

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<sup>66</sup> Though it should be noted that civil courts occasionally found railroad companies liable for excessive force – another example of the passing of economic and legal responsibility for racist crime to railroad companies.

reason, your petitioners beg to assure you that the law guaranteeing to us equal accommodations in travel is not being observed.” (qtd. in Kornweibel 245)<sup>67</sup>

Here again we see feeling and feelings threatened by “separate but equal.” The African-American experience of modern travel at the turn-of-the-century involved a sensorium bombarded by stressors additional to those already being coped with.

As I will argue more fully in the second part of this thesis, the African-American response to such a railroad experience relies upon the terms laid out above: space and sensation. However, even before black railroad passengers become railroad performers – Jim Crow color-line jumpers – one discovers fissures in the white hegemony’s efforts to control railroad mobility, fissures exposed and exploited by a *countermobility* exerted by black passengers. We see this in Homer Plessy’s test case performance, in “the necessity of forewarning station agents in the ‘white only’ coach [...] that the light-skinned Homer Plessy had ‘colored blood’ in his veins,” a necessity that “calls attention to the gap that gradually widened between written and somatic racial signs that were supposed to be, but were not mutually corroborating” (Abel 11-12). The staring, pummeling signs “that seemed to mark space with such clarity and permanence” contained alternate readings within their very materiality, for they merely “masked the ephemeral nature of raced space.” “A simple flip of the sign revealed that white could become colored and colored white [and] introduced a level of uncertainty, a potential for ambiguity” (Welke 276).<sup>68</sup> Repeat performances within a behavioral vortex create the space and supply the audience for momentary mistakes and role-reversals.

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<sup>67</sup> As a footnote to the petition quotation, Kornweibel indicates that such complaints went unheeded: “Two years later, a real tragedy occurred on the Nashville, Chattanooga & St. Louis Railway in Tennessee when 13 blacks, riding in an antiquated Jim Crow car, were killed in a collision” (534).

<sup>68</sup> Here again is a cost-cutting policy that reveals the uneasy role of the railroad as border control.

We find, as well, such flipsides in African-American responses to the outrageous conditions of their assigned car. John Giggie notes that “[blacks] suffered the same shaky, unstable ride as white passengers, of course, but [in the Jim Crow car] they faced a barrage of physical and psychological stressors capable of not only sparking indignation and fear but also firing the religious imagination” (46). Giggie does not underplay the sensory assault on the bodies and feelings of black passengers, but his research into black religion during the Nadir uncovers “new practices and rituals” among Delta blacks that counter the exclusive use of the railroad by white southerners as “an instrument of modernity” (26). By making the railroad an “instrument” for equal use across the color line – a process, I will argue below, of “self-furnishing” – southern blacks found a means for their own modernization, a countermobility, regardless of the white hegemony’s desire that they lag behind politically, economically, and expressively.

The potential for expression occurred because, however spatially divided the sets of cars were, the station, platform, and connected cars created ground for public sensory reinscription: “Black professionals frequently carried onto the train their habit of publicly distinguishing themselves in a dignified fashion. [...] African Americans from the lower classes mocked the color line, too, but usually through more boisterous and physical means” (Giggie 42). The sight and sound of dignity or unruliness – two takes on rebellion – emanated around and across the railroad color line and so created a *counter-sensorium*. The hyper-mobility and hyper-sensation of the railroad created opportunities for black southerners to invest countercultural attention on the color lines and rail lines of the South. By focusing on the phenomenon of expression (railroad sensation made railroad communication), one finds railroad performances to be

products of the overall increased mobility. Baudelaire's flâneur, after all, is an expressive subject whose *mouvements brusques* "turn out to be sources of creative power" (Berman 160).

### III. PERFORMANCES OF PROTEST

We have seen how the railroad acted upon the bodies of turn-of-the-century passengers and, particularly, on the bodies of black southerners. Having established the spatial orientation of segregation law and the resultant behavioral vortex of the color line, this thesis will proceed in this section to account for the expressive responses of African-American artists who innovated strategies for turning train spaces into sites for resistance. In this way, the railroad color line becomes an *expressive vortex*. Expression refers to the material production and the physical performance of turn-of-the-century train travel. It bears considering, then, the functioning of *The Marrow of Tradition* and *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* within the marketplace before moving into that marketplace and accounting for the sights and sounds of blues performances.

In their discussion of the cultural concept of the “marketplace” in *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, Peter Stallybrass and Allon White find, “At once a bounded enclosure and a site of open commerce, it is both the imagined centre of an urban community and its structural interconnection with the network of goods, commodities, markets, sites of commerce and place of production which sustain it” (27). Clearly, the railroad functions within and comes to stand as its own kind of marketplace. At once “bounded” and “open” the railroad carries goods, material and cultural, through interconnected space.<sup>69</sup> The marketplace is simultaneously “the epitome of local identity [...] and the unsettling of that identity by the trade and traffic of goods from elsewhere” (27). “Local” and “elsewhere” become intermixed in the behavioral

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<sup>69</sup> The power of such a function for black southerners will become clear in section (C) below, when I investigate the spread of musicians and music across the rural spaces of the South.



vortex, and the very nature of the railroad supply chain threatens the imposition of the color line within its dynamic space. The railroad supply chain might be considered both physically (carrying material culture) and symbolically (carried by expressive culture). In the latter meaning railroad travel is a common experience that produces lines of communication to an audience, a kind of mass communication.

Stallybrass and White register the social impact of the marketplace as “a commingling of categories usually kept separate and opposed: centre and periphery, inside and outside, stranger and local, commerce and festivity, high and low. In the marketplace pure and simple categories of thought find themselves perplexed and one-sided. Only hybrid notions are appropriate to such a hybrid place” (27). The innovative juridical efforts by southern legislatures to fix space and fix status within such a flux are always already susceptible to fissure and exposure. As a behavioral vortex the railroad color line is inundated with strange performances. Despite white efforts at reiterative control, black performers exploit ambiguities in order to perform protest before (and for) an always available, always attentive audience.

Having examined the experience of train travel and having read *The Marrow of Tradition* and *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* in relation to that experience, this thesis will proceed to examine the reception of each of these texts in the turn-of-the-century marketplace. After looking closely at the ability of the texts to move between spaces via counter-mobility, we might then compare their impact in the marketplace to the counter-sensorial quality of the railroad performances of Henry Thomas and Honeyboy Edwards. Crucial to my measurement of movement and sensation is James Scott’s concept of the “hidden transcript.” We have seen already how “racism routinely generate[s] the practices and rituals of denigration, insult and assaults on the body.” Now we will “interpret the rumors, gossip, folktales, songs, gestures,

jokes, and theater of the powerless as vehicles by which [...] they insinuate a critique of power while hiding behind anonymity or behind innocuous understandings of their conduct,” a process of “ideological insubordination” Scott calls “the infrapolitics of the powerless” (Scott xi-xii, xiii).<sup>70</sup>

Given the “systemic social doctrine” of Jim Crow, “resistance to ideological domination requires a counterideology – a negation – that will effectively provide a general normative form to the host of resistant practices invented in self-defense by any subordinate group” (Scott 117-18). Such work entails “staying somehow within the law,” and so a counter-innovation must be created in the spirit of *flânerie*, with “an experimental spirit and a capacity to test and exploit all the loopholes, ambiguities, silences, and lapses available” (Scott 139). “Carriers” of hidden transcripts must “follow trades or vocations that encourage physical mobility,” must “possess verbal facility [that] enables [the carrier] to conduct what amounts to a veiled discourse of dignity and self-assertion within the public transcript” (124, 137). The authors and musicians archived here function as “carriers” of hidden transcripts, who, with varying degrees of success, rely on countermobility to create counter-sensation.

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<sup>70</sup> Indeed, the act of interpretation is critical for the dissemination of “hidden transcripts”: “The undeclared ideological guerilla war that rages in this political space requires that we enter the world of rumor, gossip, disguises, linguistic tricks, metaphors, euphemisms, folktales, ritual gestures, anonymity. For good reason, nothing is entirely straightforward here; the realities of power for subordinate groups mean that much of their political action requires interpretation precisely because it is intended to be cryptic and opaque” (Scott 137).

### **(A) Re-Riding *Plessy***

In responding, five years on, to the *Plessy* decision – now underwriting segregation laws in all the southern states, including North Carolina – Charles Chesnutt uses an apparent genre novel to package a careful re-reading of the court case. Stephen Knadler alerts us to the “complicated maneuvering” required for a black writer in the literary marketplace: “A novel that would pass was a novel that was necessarily double-voiced, a novel that had to signify and to speak differently to its ideal and its typical (its liberal white) readers” (430). There is, as Stallybrass and White know, a need for hybridity in negotiating the marketplace, for a novel’s passage into the channels of the marketplace.<sup>71</sup> In reading Chesnutt’s correspondence with R. W. Glider, editor of *Century Magazine*, Knadler recognizes Chesnutt’s awareness of his readership’s demand for a “melodramatic formula,” and the author cannily drew on models set by the unreconstructed “plantation literature” of Thomas Nelson Page and Joel Chandler Harris (430). Chesnutt’s verbal facility, his countermobility – exhibited by his masking race-question discourse as melodrama, his “borrowing modern experimental techniques in multiple perspectives and indirect discourse” (Knadler 430) – allowed authorial access to a white audience who would not have read a social-realist tract on black-white relations.

In doing so, Chesnutt recognizes the public transcript’s dependence upon the “appearance of unanimity” for “the dramaturgy of [...] domination” (Scott 45). And he recognizes the need to undermine that unanimity in the face of a New South atmosphere, with a racial discourse claiming, as Henry Grady does, that blacks and whites are “the two most dissimilar types of the human race” whose difference “[a]t every point [...] is positive and striking” (138). Particularly noteworthy is Grady’s sense of “separate but equal,” his conviction that social turmoil requires

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<sup>71</sup> Knadler notes that the supply chains of black-authored texts were themselves bifurcated like passenger trains, “the color line [...] reproduced and codified within aesthetic boundaries between realism and (black) melodrama” (430).

the “two” races to “walk in separate paths in the South. As near as may be, these paths should be made equal – but separate they must be now and always” (141). Concerned with the technological progress of burgeoning southern railroad hub Atlanta, Georgia, Grady taps into the rhetoric of industrial standardization. We have seen the way race regulations draw from the same praxis as railroad regulations like time and track gauge, and here is a voice of the 1880s South that forecasts the shift from de facto segregation to post-*Plessy* segregation, from separate to “separate but equal.”

“The imposition of euphemisms on the public transcript,” writes Scott, “plays a [...] role in masking the many nasty facts of domination and giving them a harmless or sanitized aspect. In particular they are designed to obscure the use of coercion” (Scott 53). *Marrow* might be read as Chesnut’s effort to expose the reality behind the euphemism “separate but equal.” The discourse of the separation of the races spread during the postbellum years into a variety of social discourses, a nationwide process Robert Wiebe calls a “search for order”:

Whenever anxieties rose across the nation, followers of the bureaucratic way had to turn for help to one of several traditional techniques for achieving tighter cohesion. One of these time-honored devices was exclusion: draw a line around the good society and dismiss the remainder. Just as defenders of the community and the men of power late in the nineteenth century each had denied their enemies a place in the true America, so worried people in the twentieth also separated the legitimate from the illegitimate. The most elaborate method – a compound of biology, pseudo-science, and hyperactive imaginations – divided the people of the world by race and located each group along a value scale according to its distinctive, inherent characteristics. (156)

A variety of discourses get deployed in the “good society” in order to spatially segregate the “remainder.” In order to counter the multifaceted ideology of exclusionary Jim Crow, Chesnut created a text built to counter the rhetoric – scientific and legal – of separate but equal, a feat requiring a novel of multifaceted generic makeup.

Countering the ideology of Jim Crow meant concessions to plot demands by writers wishing to speak to a Jim Crow nation, but meeting such demands created the possibility of a masked work passing as melodrama. *Marrow*, for Chesnutt, was a “tremendous sort of combination,” a mixture of a “novel and a political and sociological tract” (qtd. in Knadler 429). The train passage in particular performs an interdisciplinary function, containing a sharply tuned critique of *Plessy* and of the academic discourse undergirding the decision. Knadler notes Chesnutt’s use of “the language of comparative anthropology” intermixed with “legal language and the African-American’s own perception of his skin color,” that the author employs to underscore the true nature of Jim Crow legislation as “legal fictions” (432). Additionally, Chesnutt’s critique hides behind a mixture of “indirect and direct forms of reporting,” making it “impossible to trace the source of the judgment” (Knadler 433). The thrust of the judgment is clear, however, as Chesnutt’s close-reading of *Plessy* draws on the case’s non-unanimous outcome and exposes the euphemistic nature of “separate but equal.”

Justice Harlan’s dissent provides the only countertext to the majority’s eight votes to one ruling and bears meaningfully on the spatial closing effect of the law and the Court’s upholding of it. Citing the English Common Law *Commentaries* of William Blackstone, Harlan writes:

“Personal liberty [...] consists in the power of *locomotion*, of changing situation, or removing one’s person to whatsoever places one’s own inclination may direct, without imprisonment or restraint, unless by due course of law.” If a white man and a black man choose to occupy the same public conveyance on a public highway, it is their right to do so, and no government proceeding alone on grounds of race, can prevent it without infringing the personal liberty of each. (557; emphasis added)

By casting an upwardly mobile, mixed-race character in a reprise of the role of Homer Plessy, Chesnutt reveals the imprisoning nature of “separate but equal.” The intrusion into William Miller’s assigned space by Captain McBane further alerts the audience to the inequality of the

spaces in the extralegal mobility of white southerners. The novel's strenuous attention to the text of *Plessy* involves adding the details of a Chinese citizen and a black nurse taking their seats in the (now falsely named) "white car" (Brook 329). Such legal close reading is at the heart of Chesnutt's powerful critique; it delegitimizes segregation by inscribing the *Plessy* decision onto a fictional space, with its sensorial imagery. Chesnutt thereby creates for himself solid ground on which to advance an argument against those who insist that the segregation of train cars defuses racial violence, that basis for legitimization over which Brown and Harlan disagree.

While we can take measure of the countermobility of the work, it bears mentioning that the novel did not gain a broad readership, although Chesnutt sought the attention of readers in positions of power – he sent the novel to "President Roosevelt and his cabinet, as well as to prominent members of Congress" (Knadler 428). Making the right moves to pass into the literary marketplace, however, does not guarantee the dissemination of a counter-sensorium, wherein race challenges capture by faulty white senses. Chesnutt's innovation, perhaps, was not profound enough. The barbs of criticism hidden within the novel's melodramatic patterns were too noticeable; it was, in one view, the book's "wedding of literary protest with sophisticated ironies and self-reflection that prompted resistance" (Bentley and Gunning 25). Indeed, Chesnutt "abandoned" writing as a full-time enterprise, in large part due to *Marrow*'s "tepid sales and largely disappointing reviews" (Bentley and Gunning 26). Though the railroad scene provides ground for a sharp criticism of *Plessy*, if the railroad communication does not contribute to rethinking the Jim Crow sensorium, if the countermobility does not produce a railroad performance that alters the sensorium of its audience, then one detects an innovation gap and a need for future performers to seek new forms of hybridity and passing in the marketplace of cultural expression.

## (B) Ragging the Railroad

*The subordinate moves back and forth, as it were, between two worlds: the world of the master and the offstage world of subordinates. Both of these worlds have sanctioning power. While subordinates normally can monitor the public transcript performance of other subordinates, the dominant can rarely monitor fully the hidden transcript.*

—James Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*.

*Ragtime has not only influenced American music, it has influenced American life; indeed, it has saturated American Life. It has become the popular medium for our national expression musically. And who can say that it does not express the blare and jangle and the surge, too, of our national spirit?*

—James Weldon Johnson, preface to *The Book of American Negro Poetry*

Beyond mere genre-play, the publication history of James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* reveals countermobility on multiple fronts. In addition to being a novel masked as an autobiography (within an established African-American literary form), the book represents the verbal facility and agile commercial movements of its canny author. Not only does the novel's protagonist pass between identities and locations with the ease of the flâneur, Johnson himself was an insistent traveler. An active train passenger, the Jacksonville, Florida native moved to New York City to pursue a successful songwriting career, and then, in 1906, he accepted a post in the U.S. consular service in Venezuela. *Autobiography* was a work-in-progress during that consulship and another in Nicaragua and marks a move by Johnson away from songwriting to fiction at the turn of the century.

In *Along this Way*, his 1933 memoir, Johnson describes the sensation of working in the novel form: “‘The story developed in my mind more rapidly than I expected that it would; at times, outrunning my speed to get it down. The use of prose as a creative medium was new to me; its latitude, its flexibility, its comprehensiveness, the variety of approaches it afforded for surmounting technical difficulties gave me a feeling of exhilaration, exhilaration similar to that which goes with the freedom of motion’” (qtd. in Goldsby 248). Jacqueline Goldsby presents a picture of Johnson as a more frustrated traveler than the author lets on – notably the lines above

were published in a public document, written deliberately for a readership – but she shows Johnson nonetheless to be an avid explorer of the “freedom of motion” attending his participation within the literary marketplace.

Charles Chesnutt was a unique case in getting his novel published by a white firm, and we have seen the difficulties imposed on a minority writer by such a situation; we have seen too the resultant lack of guaranteed readership. Channels opened by a large publication firm carry with them the color-line expectations of a white readership. Johnson’s obstacles, on the other hand, were largely self-imposed, structured around a central conceit of the novel: that it is the autobiography of an anonymous, elusive writer (Goldsby 254). Johnson *used* the white job printer Sherman, French, and Company in order to mask his authorship. Among the African-American audience, as “musician-turned-diplomat [he] cut a handsome figure as cultural hero” and as “the author of the ‘Negro National Anthem,’ Johnson could not submit a manuscript to a black publisher and expect that his anonymity would be maintained” (Goldsby 254-55). Following Goldsby, then, I am interested in reading *Autobiography* as positioned in the first of two discrete historical moments: “Placing the novel in its original [1912] context allows readers to assess the complexity of Johnson’s efforts to conceive a narrative form and cultivate a reading public for what critics now consider the first modernist novel in the African-American canon” (246).

While *The Marrow of Tradition* represents a railroad performance in its recreation of the *Plessy* moment, a symbolic countermobility, Johnson infuses a similar racial mobility with a truly *physical* performance, a hybridization of truth and fiction aptly suited to the book’s presence in the marketplace.<sup>72</sup> “[A]s an autobiography, it was entirely consistent that the

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<sup>72</sup> “[I]n the age of corporate capitalism, writing, reading, and publishing were viewed [increasingly] as commodities to be systematically exploited” (Goldsby 255).



protagonist would have selected a publisher that catered to unknown amateur authors and, further, that he would have done business with a white firm. Going to a black job printer would have signaled the ‘ex-colored man’s’ return to the world he had forsaken in order to pass for white” (Goldsby 255). Goldsby relates the sense of Johnson’s business savvy, his “actively select[ing]” Sherman, French for two deliberate purposes: “to cultivate a diverse audience for the novel and to trade off the firm’s marginal status.”<sup>73</sup> And she notes of the Boston firm that, though it was not prestigious, “it did broaden the potential public to which the book could be directed. The company’s imprint would encourage white readers to consider the book because its titles were not usually associated with the unseemly ‘race question’” (255).

Thus, anonymity, in addition to producing the sensation of reading the text “behind the scenes,” was additionally a tactic of passing the novel into the marketplace despite its potentially inflammatory content. ““There must be in the reader’s mind,”” Johnson insisted, ““the thought that, at least, it may be true”” (qtd. in Goldsby 257). This was crucial for an author interested in convincing readers “that the phenomenon of a racially mixed man passing as white was one that was widespread and possibly at play in any and every community (and, possibly, in any and every white family) throughout the country” (Goldsby 257). Johnson innovated a method of passing into the actual surroundings of his readership to call attention to the porousness, the *raggedness*, of the color line.

After he resigned from the consul service, Johnson continued to position himself within the upper echelons of influential African Americans, working for the NAACP and curating collections of African American folk music (Goldsby 263). By the second printing in 1927, “the book’s power as a statement of prophecy of the rise of black folk culture as a national art form”

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<sup>73</sup> Johnson’s active involvement extended beyond publisher selection; as the firm “was not predisposed to spend much energy cultivating the public’s interest, it fell to Johnson to devise a marketing plan for the novel” (Goldsby 256).

had been announced (Goldsby 264). This second historical moment of the novel's publication – with Johnson as the acknowledged trickster author – reveals the way the form of the book continued its initial exhilarating freedom of movement. The power of *Autobiography's* countermobility is clear. Despite facing some difficulties – the book was out of print from 1916 to 1927 – Johnson, I will argue, created a mechanism for carrying his message of protest against the color line and the extralegal brutality woven into the nation's white hegemonic structure. I will go on to argue that Johnson's carrying his musical leanings into the text reveals the power of creating a counter-sensorium in which to *sound* a counterideology.

The anonymously authored *Autobiography's* initial edition performs protest within the infrapolitics of the “race question,” and the space left absent by the namelessness to reverberate particularly powerfully during a stretch of southern railroad performances by the narrator (as presumptive author). In a version of a traveling vaudeville act, the ex-colored man moves from “some little railroad-station town” to another, seeking out black folk songs for a project that would involve re-packaging the music for a mass (mixed race) audience. One encounters layers of passing here, with the author passing as an autobiographer, passing through southern towns at will (the havoc-wreaking modern stranger), and planning to pass black folk expression into the concert halls and parlors of white and black listeners. As behavioral vortex, the color line invites, even demands, the ex-colored man to accidentally perform whiteness as it draws an audience to read his race, and the reader stands witness to its erasure:

In thus traveling through the country I was sometimes amused [...] to be taken for and treated as a white man, and six hours later, when it was learned that I was stopping at the house of the colored preacher or school teacher, to note the attitude of the whole town change. At times this led even to embarrassment. Yet it cannot be so embarrassing for a colored man to be taken for white as for a white man to be taken for colored; and I have heard of several cases of the latter kind. (126)

The visual (and sonic) disorientation functions as a perspectival distortion, as a lag in awareness that matches the way ragtime music takes a familiar song and moves it in a syncopated, faster rhythm, forcing the listener to “catch up” to the music. The movement between spaces – the spatialization of race is clearly in evidence – is too quick for the application of Jim Crow, and it happens along rail lines, the very markers of modern segregation and accelerators of modern experience.

We are led to believe that the ex-colored man travels as a white passenger, perhaps in the first-class car.<sup>74</sup> He is not identified as “colored” until he enters the homes – racialized space – of black locals. Although the reader is in on the joke, so to speak, Johnson’s railroad performance of racial ambiguity echoes the authorial ambiguity contained in the actual writer-reader exchange. “Six hours later” might just as easily refer to the relative amount of time Johnson’s authorship remained unknown and the novel remained a piece of nonfiction. Meanwhile, *Autobiography* has passed into its readership as a piece of real-world reportage, and the ex-colored man has passed into a series of small southern towns as an emphatic message about the vagrancy of racial markings.

We receive, at the end of the passage, in the midst of Johnson’s hypermobile prose feints and leaps, an audio report. The ex-colored man relays information previously recorded, his having “heard” of white travelers being “taken” for black, an amplified discomfort of the sort we encountered above, the jostled body experiencing jostled dignity in the Jim Crow car. Other audio recordings and playbacks in *Autobiography* permit the novel to engage in a discussion about modern media and race. Johnson, the musician, composer, and music anthologist, taps into the color-line movement possible within the modern sensorium via sound passages. As Mark

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<sup>74</sup> Earlier in the narrative the ex-colored man admits that the time he spent in Europe with a millionaire – experiences I will examine below – has caused “a certain amount of comfort and luxury [to have] become a necessity” (115).

Goble reminds us in his work *Beautiful Circuits*, the turn of the twentieth century was a moment of media innovation, and the act of deciding to write – much less turning to the stationary printed word as a source of propulsion – might be viewed as a “surrender” to the print medium “at a moment when new practices of communication were making the experience of technology itself an occasion for aesthetic experiment and historical reflection” (11). Why, then, would Johnson turn from the possibilities of music making during an era that witnessed the rise of phonograph and radio technologies? Or, better yet, what traces of sonic recording and projection does *Autobiography* carry in its printed lines?

Several critics detect a modern sensorium in this shape-shifting work. Katherine Biers reads the novel as informed by “a material logic of the phonograph “closely tied to the so-called ragtime craze of the pre-World War I era” (99). She finds that, above and beyond speaking behind the mask of anonymity, the novel taps into a “phonographism” that produces a “sonic trace of a body that, unknown to its master, speaks the truth about race in America” (99).<sup>75</sup> Some contemporary music critics cast ragtime as having ““the true American rhythm,”” prompting Biers to position ragtime as “American *autopoiesis*,” that is, “the sound of a nation hearing and understanding itself speak” (Biers 107, 108). If the railroad comes to constitute (raced) bodies vulnerable to new sensations and dangers, the sounds of ragtime come to constitute a rhythm engineered to keep pace with other machinic demands on modern bodies. Discussing jazz during

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<sup>75</sup> “Ragtime is phonographic [in that] it was born with the Edison phonograph, which also made sonic materiality audible by reproducing sound in the absence of text or written score. Media theorists have elaborated the ways in which the machine’s promise to infinitely expand the possibilities for preserving memory [...] came at the expense of banishing ideality from the voice, not preserving it so much as embalming it” (Biers 101). I will argue in section (C) below that the railroad train, in addition to its role as cinema’s predecessor, precedes the phonograph as a “talking machine.” The commonality of train sounds provided lines of communication to open up between isolated listeners. The disembodied quality of phonographic sound, further, joins into the identity-threatening sensorium of the jostling train ride: “In its ability to record everything in the absence of a taxonomic principle, the phonograph revealed that meaning in language, whether spoken aloud or silently heard in the text, was only a reverberation, emerging retroactively from unconscious bodily responses to a meaningless spectrum of aural, visual, and tactile stimuli” (Biers 101).

the Machine Age, Joel Dinerstein finds the “driving, syncopated rhythms” to be in direct dialogue with the experiential accelerations wrought by modern industrialization (5). The musical rhythms of new popular genres like ragtime, jazz, and blues establish a cultural response to modernity specifically “in the cultural potency and aesthetic attractions of the rhythms, sounds, and symbols derived from the public’s embrace of the train – the loudest, fastest, most powerful machine in the landscape in the formative period of American nation building” (Dinerstein 73). The sound of the railroad in musical expression will be explored in section (C) below, but the rise of blues music in the 1920s was heir to the ragtime craze.

“Because of its dual associations with race and with recording machines, ragtime was being widely described during this period as a force that was turning American listeners into ‘nervous pianos’ instead of vessels ready to be infused with the democratic spirit. In its presence, listeners became vulnerable to the ubiquitous disease of neurasthenia” (Biers 103). From the perspective of hegemonic forces of discipline and control – the Supreme Court’s attempt to capture Homer Plessy; southern legislatures’ attempts to capture the fugitive spaces of train cars – ragtime sounds in their partial-identifiability produce shocks to the system. “By putting the train into the music, musicians enabled listeners and dancers to ‘wear’ their cultural identity through an embrace of technology, optimism, speed, and power [...]. [Such music] gave artistic form to their childhood landscapes (and soundscapes), to their dreams of geographical (and upward) mobility, and to their hopes of finding out what was over the hill and arriving in style” (Dinerstein 73). For a composer like James Weldon Johnson or a musician like the ex-colored man, ragtime provides the energy necessary to economic and communicative mobility. Ragtime, after all, speaks with two voices as a modern performance of the western musical tradition.

Literary critics drawn to reading *Autobiography* through media theory are perhaps most drawn to a scene that occurs at a high society party in New York City. The host of the party is the ex-colored man's "millionaire friend" and "benefactor," a white man who pays the ex-colored man to play ragtime piano upon request.<sup>76</sup>

At a word from the host I struck up one of my liveliest ragtime pieces. The effect was surprising [...]. As soon as I began, the conversation suddenly stopped. It was a pleasure to me to watch the expression of astonishment and delight that grew on the faces of everybody. [...] Several of the women [...] gather[ed] about the table [and] watched my fingers [...]. When the guests arose, I struck up my ragtime transcription of Mendelssohn's "Wedding March," playing it with terrific chromatic octave runs in the bass. This raised everybody's spirits to the highest point of gaiety, and the whole company involuntarily and unconsciously did an impromptu cake-walk. (87)<sup>77</sup>

Not only does the ex-colored man seem a music machine, striking up songs at various cues, the effect of the music blurs the line between listener and machine. It is a line additionally inscribed with racial concerns, a "contact zone" positioned in a site meant to separate bodies, guests from servant, listener from music source, white body from black body. There is between pianist and his benefactor's guests "the specter of a mimesis" that inserts itself amongst bodies, "and even erupt within them, in defiance of their owners' conscious control" (Biers 105). The conjoining of bodies – eyes and fingers, piano notes and dancing bodies – makes of the ex-colored man's transcription a hidden transcript, for though the behavior might be recorded in a public account of the party, even the "involuntary response" of the dancing, the degree of *forced movement* that

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<sup>76</sup> The slave/master relationship between the characters is notable, to say the least, though not of interest here. I will be reading the ex-colored man's hired performances as indicative, following Biers, of the narrator's phonographism: "Another way to describe what happens when ex-colored man plays music for his white patrons [...] is to say that he becomes a phonograph" (Biers 112).

<sup>77</sup> The guests are described as Hale's-Tours-like-thrill seekers: "These were people – and they represented a large class – who were ever expecting to find happiness in novelty, each day restlessly exploring and exhausting every resource of this great city that might possibly furnish a new sensation of awaken a fresh emotion, and who were always grateful to anyone who aided them in their quest" (Johnson, *Autobiography* 87).

extends from white bodies into black cultural forms is best announced by the secretly recording pianist.<sup>78</sup>

Goble writes of the scene, “The frenzy with which all racial identities at issue here get thoroughly confused [...] seems precisely to be the point of the evening’s entertainment” (186). He also finds room in the scene for reading the inclusion of the “Wedding March” as willfully ignorant of – and playfully engaged in – the potential for miscegenation (186). Even more interestingly, Biers probes the connection between “cake-walk” and “Wedding March” in order to examine the lag-time of ragtime: “In setting bodies into motion, the form of the ‘Wedding March’ rag sounds out the racialized difference between inscription and consciousness, writing and voice, that its performers seem wholly to forget” (112). The result is an elision of machined sound and machinic body, a body that “hears and then imitates sounds on a frequency all its own” (Biers 105). Previously raced bodies – during, say, the dining portion of the soiree – find themselves racing towards a spectacular display of interracial mixture: white people erupting into a dance-form evolved by black people imitating white dancers.

Before moving to the fully literal zone of the performances undertaken by blues musicians in the years immediately following the publication of *Autobiography*, we need to account for the way Johnson writes the white response to black counterculture. Bruce Barnhart reads the benefactor’s refusal to join the dancing – he remains motionless, totally unresponsive, during his pianist’s playing – as a forced maintenance of the boundaries otherwise blurred during

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<sup>78</sup> Biers reads pieces of contemporary music criticism alongside Johnson, and finds the intimacy-erupting tendency of “the ‘dance craze’ was reported with as much fascination as disdain,” going on to quote a German visitor to the U.S. who “‘discovered,’” with some delighted shock, that a ragtime performance has put his legs “‘in a condition of great excitement. They twitched as though charged with electricity and betrayed a considerable and rather dangerous desire to jerk me from my seat.... It [was a feeling] energetic, material, independent as though one encountered a balking horse, which it is absolutely impossible to master” (Biers 105). Timothy Spaulding finds Johnson to be uncomfortably positioned, as the ex-colored man is throughout the text, between black expression and white audience: “For Johnson, ragtime is an innovative and expressive form [that] advances a conception of black music that emphasizes hybridity over a stable, ‘authentic’ and ‘pure’ conception but struggles with a bourgeois response to ragtime and its cultural origins” (Spaulding 230).

the party (563-64). The eventual outcome for a body that confronts but refuses to engage with modern sensation, according to Johnson's narrative, is self-destruction: the benefactor kills himself some months after disengaging with the ex-colored man. Such violence, an undercurrent coming to be horrifically exposed, runs throughout the narrative. While the ex-colored man, appropriately, *hears* of his millionaire friend's suicide, he is fully recording witness to the extralegal tactics employed by southern whites to capture black mobile bodies and to control the engines of modern movement.

The narrator's engagement with black folk music is cut short when he witnesses a lynching in one of the little railroad towns. If the train cars and the courtrooms weren't adequate space for the inscription of racial superiority, the lynch mob's creation of an extralegal zone of torture and execution stands as the extreme version of the modern search for order: exclusion in its most violent expression. Biers finds *Autobiography* "to illustrate that the production and often violent maintenance of categories of race and racial difference were a means for the rapidly waning nineteenth century to escape [...] uncomfortably modern truths" (Biers 113). The mode of escape, however, is a modern mode of movement (with its own attendant discomforts), the southern railroad. The role of the station as simultaneous creator and destroyer of modern locality is clear in the narrator's description of the town: "a straggling line of brick and wooden stores on one side of the railroad track and some cottages of various sizes on the other side" (134). It is here that the narrator is arrested in his many passing movements by a lynching scene.

The sensitive listening of the black southerner is apparent, as is an elevated form of neurasthenia:

Suddenly I became conscious of [a] sense of alarm [...]. I listened, straining every nerve to hear above the tumult of my quickening pulse. I caught the murmur of voices, then the gallop of a horse, then of another and another. Now thoroughly alarmed, I woke my companion, and together we both listened. [...] My friend did all in his power to dissuade me from venturing out, but it was impossible for me to remain in the house under such tense excitement. My nerves would not have



stood it. Perhaps what bravery I exercised in going out was due to the fact that I felt sure my own identity as a colored man had not yet become known in the town. (135)

The ex-colored man retains the mobility allowed by his racial ambiguity, and, his attention wrenched from the folk art of black southerners, he records the proceedings of the lynching: the railroad station origin (“There was gathered there a crowd of men, all white”); the modern mobilization (“and others were steadily arriving, seemingly from all the surrounding area”); the wonder-inducing communication network (“How did the news spread so quickly?”); the “terror-instilling sound known as the ‘rebel yell’” and the “Burn him!” cry that runs “like an electric current” through the railroad-arrived mob; the use of a “railroad tie” for a stake; and, most shocking of all, the victim’s “cries and groans” (135-6). All throughout the spectacle the narrator continues to record, “powerless to take my eyes from what I did not want to see” (136). Johnson thus reports to a broad readership the particularly discomforting sights and sounds of the African-American sensorium during the Nadir. His narrative taps into new technologies for recording, the movie camera and phonograph, and he projects a scene of modern horror, in which the railroad plays a monstrous role.

The narrator’s ability to pass unnoticed into the white crowd watching a lynching (the other black citizens have slipped out of sight) challenges the color line during its moments of most violent exclusion, but the ex-colored man has assumed his title. He catches the “afternoon train” and travels out of the South (138). The powerful anonymity of the ex-colored man in Johnson’s 1912 text leaves an absence in black southern communities (for which it received negative reviews in some of the nation’s influential black newspapers), even as it positions a legally black citizen in the midst of its white reading public. Although the narrative draws its reader behind the scenes of the problem of the color line and into participation in its behavioral

vortex, the hyper-mobile text leaves the South to its lynching and scorched earth. Despite the powerfully countermobile deployments of counter-sensation, the ending of the narrative depicts the violently responsive measures of the white population, its hegemonic ability to out-maneuver and out-shock the black population. *Autobiography* does, on the other hand, indicate a field of performance that creates the opportunities for more effective forms of expression and the means of amplifying them: modern media soundscapes.

## (C) Train Sounds

*[T]he human voice is irrepressible.*

—James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*

*Nothing essential happens in the absence of noise.*

—Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*

*The blues counteragent that is so much a part of many people's equipment for living that they hardly ever think about it as such anymore is that artful and sometimes seemingly magical combination of idiomatic incantation and percussion that creates the dance-oriented goodtime music also known as the blues.*

—Albert Murray, *Stomping the Blues*

As a child growing up on a central Tennessee farm during the first decade of the twentieth century, DeFord Bailey would fall asleep listening out for the train's whistle. He later explained his aural ability: “*I’m just like a microphone. [...] I pick up everything I hear around me*” (qtd. in Morton 21; emphasis added). Bailey began his musical career as a listener sensitive to the sounds of modernity that entered his (not so) isolated, rural home. The railroad train was his musical antecedent, and his path to Grand Ole Opry and radio fame might be read as a translation of train sounds through the harmonica he came to master. Bailey’s experience of train sound recording and playback indicates the power of the train as sound machine: “*I was playing the train long before I ever saw one*” (qtd in Morton 74).<sup>79</sup> Thinking back from his technology-surrounded recording career, Bailey infuses his remembered childhood train experiences with the devices beyond the reach of a sharecropper at the turn of the century. The power of such a move becomes clear when viewed alongside the career of DeFord’s grandfather, Lewis Bailey, who, upon being freed in 1863, fought for the Union for the remainder of the Civil War before spending the remainder of his life as a sharecropper (Morton 13). Despite being a “skilled

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<sup>79</sup> As Bailey describes his playing, “*You can tell my train is moving. Every time I blow, you can tell I’m getting further. It’s moving out of sight as I blow. [...] I’m always reaching out. When I get around 115 miles per hour, I can feel it. My normal speed is 95 miles an hour. That don’t feel like I’m doing nothing, but my train sure enough moves along*” (qtd. in Morton 78). Notice that by playing the train Bailey embodies the powerful, speeding machine.

shoemaker” and a “superb fiddler” Lewis Bailey worked another man’s land, likely with another man’s farm equipment (Morton 13). The following section will examine the nature of the career shift from Lewis to DeFord.<sup>80</sup> How does learning to imitate the railroad train provide an escape route for the grandson unavailable to the equally skilled grandfather? By what process does such imitation become an appropriation of the train’s power to *move*?

Robin Kelley describes the political value of cultural expression: “Politics is not separate from lived experience or the imaginary world of what is possible; to the contrary, politics is about these things. Politics comprises the many battles to roll back constraints and exercise some power over, or create some space within, the institutions and social relationships that dominate our lives” (Kelley, *Race* 9-10). Having examined the efforts by Charles Chesnutt and James Weldon Johnson to open up space for protest in the literary marketplace, this section will encounter the blues sounds of southern musicians. Following the example set by DeFord Bailey, I will be particularly interested in the way the “lived experience” of the performers, as depicted in memoir and biography, and the “imaginary world of what is possible,” expressed in their music, rely on physical counter-mobility – the use of railroads for dissemination of music – to create a counter-sensorium of insubordinate sights and sounds.

As Scott and Attali posit, sound always contains the potential for alteration, and the blues music of the early-twentieth-century South drew from and inspired the experience of *movement*.

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<sup>80</sup> I am primarily interested in DeFord Bailey’s sense of himself as a human microphone, but one might as easily read him as a human phonograph, like the ex-colored man. Having grown up in a sharecropping family, the eighteen-year-old Bailey moved to Nashville and began work for a wealthy family as a “houseboy,” work that he dodged by mastering the harmonica. As Bailey tells it: “One day I was in the yard and [Mrs. Bradford] heard me playing. [...] From then on, she had me stand in the corner of the room and play my harp for her company. Before she found out I could play, I had to work like the rest of the help. From then on, I just fooled around [...]. I never did no more good work. My work was playing the harp” (qtd. in Morton 34). The tale is open to more careful reading than is done here – Miller, keeping in mind Bailey’s rural roots, finds in the story evidence of Bailey’s ability to adjust his playing to both the “yard” audience and the house audience (Miller 57). One also might attend to Bailey’s calling his “white coat, black leather tie, and white hat” and his “good shoeshine” his “make-up” (qtd. in Morton 34). These minstrel show accoutrements, along with the image of him standing in the corner and being cued by a white hand, at once problematize and underscore his self-employment.

Joel Dinerstein finds that black Americans generated sound from experience in a most modern manner, and he quotes “the preeminent modernist architect” Le Corbusier, who visited New York City in 1935 and “perceived that African Americans had successfully integrated music and technology: ‘The Negroes of the USA have breathed into jazz the song, the rhythm and the sound of machines’” (3). Looking back from the far end of the time frame of this thesis, Le Corbusier sensed in the musical expression of African Americans the power and rhythm of modern experience. Albert Murray identifies the railroad train as the machine imitated above all others; he calls the translation of railroad energy into musical rhythm “locomotive onomatopoeia.”<sup>81</sup> The train-made-music sound effect carries modern speed into the modern American’s sensibility, allowing his/her mind to catch up to the accelerating demands (and demands of acceleration) on the body. By “put[ting] machines into American music,” African-American musicians – innovators in the field – “*made sense* of factory noise,” and the responsive dance styles “gave the opportunity to *get with* the noise” (Dinerstein 6).<sup>82</sup> I argue, as others have, that black modernity is a story of black train travel and that it has as much to do with the apparently premodern rural South as it does with New York City.

“Trains vibrated in the American body,” writes Dinerstein, “and helped unify the nation geographically, technologically, sonically, physiologically” (64). We have seen how this is true for the modern sensorium and how train spaces operated as behavioral vortices. Chesnutt and Johnson employed such modern settings in their attempts to spread messages of dissent in performances of protest masked as genre writing. W. C. Handy, Henry Thomas, and Honeyboy

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<sup>81</sup> A phrase Dinerstein understands “literally”: “nearly all beat-driven American popular music emerged from the imitation, stylization, repetition, and resonance of the clackety-clack of train rhythms, the screaming of the train whistle, the patterning of the station bells that signaled arrival and departure, and the felt experience of riding the rails” (73).

<sup>82</sup> This occurs, crucially, “[a]t a time when workers and social critics complained of the overwhelming roar of machine-driven factories” (Dinerstein 6). Read this way, the rhythm of blues music speaks back to the chaos, gives order to the chaotic excess of the modern sensorium, and so produces what I call a counter-sensorium.

Edwards (along with scores of other musicians) broke from the printed page and traditional channels of written discourse to tap into train sounds, “the music of techno-progress itself: the rhythmic drive of technological change and the promise of social mobility” (Dinerstein 64). I will examine a progression of self-furnishing by which southern black men equipped themselves with modern communication technologies. In doing so, they joined a progression of protest that came to be sonically woven into the southern sensorium: protest that spoke against Jim Crow’s public transcript – the discourse of segregation’s boundaries – and against the indignities of agricultural employment and “separate but equal.”<sup>83</sup>

Although, as Karl Miller shows in *Segregating Sound*, pinpointing a particular musical genre in the flux and flow of the early-twentieth-century music-scape can be misleading, focusing on “the blues” allows me to trace material culture along train routes crisscrossing the Jim Crow South.<sup>84</sup> Murray notices a pronounced “preoccupation” with the railroad within the blues idiom, and browsing the titles of blues songs (not to mention the lyrics) reveals repeated “incantations” of train imagery (118). Indeed, there is a decided link between the train and the solo (self-accompanied) songster – who is variously identified as itinerant-/vagabond-/vagrant-/hobo-/country-/rural-/blues- musician.

William Barlow calls blues musicians “the makers and carriers of a music that resisted cultural domination in both form and content” (5). If the Jim Crow legal regime, the debt peonage sharecropping system, and the oppression of black bodies and voices created the

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<sup>83</sup> Dinerstein provides a usefully sweeping statement that marks the territory for my investigation: “Contrary to the assumption that culture diffuses from the center to the periphery, in this case the subcultural practices of a low-income ethnic group *colonized* the musical practices of the nation (and the world). The nature of this process – integrating the sound of trains into music and culture—began in the antebellum period, and it reached a level of almost total diffusion when the national media network unified in the 1930s around big-band swing culture” (69).

<sup>84</sup> DeFord Bailey represents just the kind of complication that lurks behind any music designation. His regular performances at the Grand Ole Opry mark him – another spatial designation – as a “country” musician, though his “locomotive onomatopoeia,” in a different context and a slightly adjusted idiom, would fit seamlessly into the blues tradition.

dominant culture during the Nadir, the ability of traveling musicians to express their experiences and to show the power of mobility (self-possession on stage) produced a counter-sensorium out of acts of countermobility. For Houston Baker, “[t]he signal expressive achievement of the blues [...] lay in their translation of technological innovativeness, unsettling demographic fluidity, and boundless frontier energy into expression which attracted avid interest from the American masses” (11). There are, then, in the records of blues lives and the records of blues tracks the sounds and symbols of the American railroad re-imagined. These records contain within them, according to Murray, the dynamic power of the blues as “counteragent,” a key component of black southerners’ (self-furnished) “equipment for living.”

Perhaps the place to begin is with an origin myth, with the train speaking to musicians before they become musicians, before they acquire instruments or seek audiences or enter the recording studio. What did it mean for rural black southerners to hear, across a spatial network desperate to retain its orderly localities, the rhythmic chugging of trains and calling of whistles, to hear these sounds come close and then recede, to hear movement made sonic? If the railroad was a site of domination built up within the “dominant discourse,” Scott reminds us that such discourse was, unavoidably, expressed in “a plastic idiom or dialect [...] capable of carrying an enormous variety of meanings, including those that are subversive of their use as intended by the dominant” (102-3). These sounds were not segregated; they entered all spaces and were, at the turn of the century, being integrated into the lives of modernizing southerners. “The hidden transcript [...] never becomes a language apart. The mere fact that it is in constant dialogue – more accurately, in argument – with dominant values ensures that the hidden and public transcripts remain mutually intelligible” (Scott 135). The public transcript, drawn from Jim Crow legislation, may have insisted that trains be divided into separate uses for each of the races, but

the *sound* of mobility and a seeming boundlessness accompanied the engine of modernity and made microphones of the men, women, and children within its hearing.

Before guitars and harmonicas, before barrelhouses and juke joints, before radio and phonograph, the railroad was at once space and device of modern communication, an *ur* talking machine.<sup>85</sup> The train's whistling possibility, its "drive and thrust," and "its promise of unrestrained mobility and unlimited freedom" inspired, according to Houston Baker, blues people as carriers of its meaning. "The blues musician at the crossing [...] became an expert at reproducing or translating these locomotive energies" (11). The "locomotive energies" make the train a site/sight and sound of mobility and *power*. Most directly, train sound influenced early blues musicians by making loud and free sound heard for miles. Albert Murray speaks to the mythological textures of this sound:

as an actual phenomenon of crucial historical significance the old steam-driven railroad train with its heroic beat, its ceremonial bell, and heraldic as well as narrative whistle goes all the way back not only to the legendary times of John Henry and the steel-driving times that were the heyday of nationwide railroad construction, but also to the ante-bellum period of the mostly metaphorical Underground Railroad that the Fugitive Slaves took from the House of Bondage to the Promised Land of Freedom. (118-24)

The train, with its wild modern calls, invokes (incants) a mythic register of escape: it reaches and plays of its own accord. Murray makes clear the connection between the railroad and the laboring body – whether laboring to extend the tracks across another's property or laboring to escape one's designation *as* another's property – and so it bears attending to train sounds and symbols as aspects of southern labor. If the railroad was to figure in blues music as "equipment for living," such figuration required wrenching the railroad from a history of exploitation.

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<sup>85</sup> The concept of the train as pre-phonographic "talking machine," mentioned in a footnote above, arose from a conversation with Jay Watson, and the phrase is his. See Jay Watson, *Reading for the Body: The Recalcitrant Materiality of Southern Fiction, 1893-1985* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2012), 110.



This history, the reality behind and surrounding the origin myth offered above, illustrates the extreme cruelty heaped upon black male bodies. Johnson's ex-colored man witnesses and communicates the role of the railroad in the horror of a lynching, but the very tracks that enable the lynching (and the southern railroad boom at large) "can be traced by the blood of [southern] prisoners" (Oshinsky 60). Bryan Wagner, examining the explosive growth of Atlanta in the 1870s, finds that "there was just no way that the huge industrial and infrastructural development envisioned by the New South Creed would have been possible without the superexploitation permitted by the convict lease" (133). The story of the railroad in the South, then, "the astonishing speed of [...] railroad construction," is a story of the dependence of (primarily) white capitalists on (primarily) black convicts used like building machines (Wagner 133).

In "*Worse than Slavery*": *Parchman Farm and the Ordeal of Jim Crow Justice* David Oshinsky illustrates the point using North Carolina: "Convict leasing spread like wildfire. During the railroad boom of the 1870s and 1880s, convicts laid most of the 3,500 miles of new track in North Carolina. They were 'mainly colored,' a machinist recalled, and their crimes had been small" (58).<sup>86</sup> And Texas stands as an example of the brutality employed to drive the track-laying: "On the Great Northern Railroad, Texas convicts were starved, whipped, beaten with tree limbs, and hung naked in wooden stocks"<sup>87</sup> "Working on the railroad," from this perspective, was an enterprise leading black bodies back into slavery (or "worse," as Oshinsky's title indicates). How then did the black voice's railroad expression escape such an arresting

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<sup>86</sup> Oshinsky's account of convict labor in his history of Parchman Farm even with its brief attention to railroad construction (55-60), shades in the background of the "railroad revolution" presented in Chapter II. For a fuller treatment see Alex Lichtenstein, *Twice the Work of Free Labor: The Political Economy of Convict Labor in the New South* (New York: Verso, 1996).

<sup>87</sup> One might re-read the John Henry myth alongside Oshinsky: "Railroad work was dangerous under any circumstances. [...] But the convict was more vulnerable than the free worker, and he paid a greater price. Despised, powerless, and expendable, he could be made to do any job, *at any pace*, in any location" (58-59; emphasis added). The steal-driving man would thereby be re-figured as a steel-driven (stolen, driven) man, a cheaper form of labor than the steam-driven machine and a body driven to ultimate exhaustion by profit seekers.

railroad spectacle? The blues method was not, as will be heard, the ex-colored man's permanent escape to the (white) North; it was an escape of constant movement recounted again and again in the sound of blues voices and instruments.

In "Railroadin' Some," recorded in the Vocalion studios in Chicago, Illinois in October 1929, Henry "Ragtime Texas" Thomas *lays a track* that describes how he *works* the railroad.<sup>88</sup> This song is individually cued for this thesis, as it were, in a jukebox brimming with railroad-themed blues songs. Below are the lyrics, reproduced in full, with instrumental breaks and sound descriptions added.

*Song begins with slow, steady quills-blows<sup>89</sup> and a steady guitar rhythm in the background, giving the effect of a train leaving its station. Thomas's voice then takes the place of the quills, at once capturing the rhythm and calling the locations with the authority of a conductor (Miller 51).*

I leave Fort Worth, Texas and go to Texarkana!  
And double back to Fort Worth!  
Come on down to Dallas!  
Change cars on the Katy!  
Coming through the Territory to Kansas City!  
And from Kansas City in Missouri!  
And Missouri to Chicago!  
I'm on my way but I don't know where!

*The last line (and each last line following below) drops the conductor's cadence and takes on the melodic sound of a sung line. During this break the quill-blows and guitar-strums are perceptibly faster, and the break ends with Thomas giving a sharp whistle, sounding like a train announcing itself.*

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<sup>88</sup> Thomas's nickname clearly provides a link to the syncopation discussed in section (B). Murray describes the way syncopation – "[u]sed as required by the blues idiom" – plays the freeing railroad rhythm into blues songs and creates room to maneuver for blues musicians as "a customary or styled [...] expression": "[Syncopation] can be refined, elaborated, extended, abstracted, and otherwise played with. It is, as the juxtaposition of any blues recording with any piece of conventional European music will bear out at once, something that blues musicians play with in the sense of making use of it as an *indispensible device*, as well as in the sense of having fun" (Murray 106; emphasis added). Syncopation, derived from the modern sounds of trains, offers a mode of communication to be acquired, mastered, and made to speak southern black experience. In further resonance with the interests of the current section, the nickname is more specifically "a hobo moniker [...] written on water towers and box cars [and] remembered in parts of Oklahoma and Louisiana and Texas but known best along a 150 mile strip of East Texas" (McCormick).

<sup>89</sup> The quills, an instrument discussed below, is essentially a panpipe that makes a reedy whistling sound. For most of the song, Thomas blows lower-pitched notes.

Change cars on the TP!  
Leaving Fort Worth, Texas!  
Going through Dallas!  
Hello Terrell!  
Grand Saline!  
Silver Lake!  
Mineola!  
Tyler!  
On to Longview!  
Jefferson!  
Marshall!  
Little Sandy!  
Big Sandy!  
Texarkana!  
And double back to Fort Worth!

*The quill-blows and guitar-strums maintain the speed of the last break, with a whistle again punctuating the end of the break.*

Change cars on the Katy!  
Leaving Dallas, Texas!  
Going through Rockwell!  
Hello Greenville!  
Celeste!  
Denison!  
South McAlester!  
Territory!  
Muskogee!  
Hello, Wagner!  
Parsons, Kansas!  
Kansas City!  
Sedalia!  
Then I change cars and jump into St Louis!

*Same as above.*

Hello Springfield!  
I'm on my way, Chicago!

*The Springfield section reveals a new trend in the song. The break has the same instrumental sounds as above but they now fill more time than the short line of sung lyrics – effecting a focus on sonic movement rather than geographic. The trend continues below.*

Bloomington!

*Same as above.*

Joliet!  
“Can the High Boiler pass on through?”

*Two short whistle bursts give the coded version of the above question.*

“High Boiler on through, sir!”

*Full instrumental break, as those above.*

Grand Crossing!

*Full instrumental break, as those above.*

Thirty-first Street depot!

*Full instrumental break, as those above.*

Polk Street depot!

*Full instrumental break, as those above.*

Chicago!<sup>90</sup>

*The final line/location/word is triumphantly called out and followed by a lyrical use of the quills that wanders away from the train sounding rhythm that has carried the song so far. This works as a coda, with the guitar continuing the railroad rhythm, if harmonizing somewhat with the quills.*

The sights evoked and sounds performed in Thomas’s travelogue will be examined closely below, and so it will function in the present discussion as a kind of background music. “Railroadin’ Some” deserves such attention above other samples of train songs (attention already received from a variety of academic projects) owing to its particular sound and style. It recalls the train panorama films of the turn of the century in its lyrical content, and the sound effects produce a Hale’s-Tours-like ride. According to Mack McCormick, whose field-research on the

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<sup>90</sup> McCormick provides the original transliteration (with the evocative exclamation points) used by Barlow, Garon, and Miller. McCormick is the source here, as well, though I have added commentary where Thomas breaks from singing to play the quills.

elusive hobo musician provides the basis for the current understanding (and, perhaps, standing) of Thomas in academic literature: “The material is as skeletal as a railway timetable and yet the thrust of it takes the listener sweeping along with [Thomas], grabbing one train and then another, the stations flashing past, the clacking of unwelded rails and the long whistle-blasts for crossing all wrapped into one of the most evocative entries in that rich category of music – and program music – dedicated to railroading” (McCormick). While riding along with the song’s speaker, the listener occupies Texas rail lines before moving north, but segregation law and the bloody history of convict labor have been overrun by the song’s joyful momentum. In this way “Ragtime Texas” rags the Texas landscape, performing an off-beat version of how and why the tracks are there. The song’s excesses (e.g. the sheer number and rapid pace of place names) spill the speaker-passenger and listener-passenger across layers of boundaries, two of which will be taken up in turn: economic ceilings and segregation partitions.

The narrative is one of escape, and, indeed, Henry Thomas is a particularly elusive figure.<sup>91</sup> Along with W. C. Handy and Honeyboy Edwards, Thomas was born and raised in the South, and the musical careers of these men carried them and their music into national circuits; their innovations originated in southern spaces. As “pioneering” figures, southern blues musicians were “key cultural workers” whose very “choice of vocation figured in a larger

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<sup>91</sup> This is true of Thomas in research terms (see McCormick for an account of the difficulty in pinning down his subject) and genre terms. Barlow calls Thomas “father of the East Texas blues tradition” and “representative of the early-twentieth-century transition from slavery folk tradition to modern blues” (61). Miller also views Thomas as a transitional figure, as indicative of the broad repertoire ability generally obscured by recording studios (51-54). Giggie notes Thomas’s religious repertoire as performed in “When the Train Comes Along,” in which he sings “of the railroad station as a place where Jesus would finally return to earth, coming on a special train to pick up the saved and bring them to heaven” (56). Mack McCormick’s “trainman” source remembers Thomas working Jim Crow cars, adjusting the song to fit the audience: “singing gospel songs for the ‘churchy people’ on one occasion, and on the next hanging around with card players and singing ‘devil’s music’” (McCormick). All of these commentators assert Thomas’s mobility between genres and song content, but Miller and McCormick are quick to note that he is of a type for blues musicians who, when viewed in the context of live performance, tend to evade genre pigeonholes. McCormick’s research turned up recollections similar to his Thomas-source, “but,” he notes, “many times, unless they offer a name or make a point of describing his size, it isn’t possible to know whether the musician they’re talking about is Henry Thomas or one of the countless others who traveled in the same path” (McCormick).

rebellion against the established social order” (Barlow 5). Mastery of self-furnished instruments – guitars rather than plows – led to self-employment, and a self-employment that decidedly spoke its benefits. Railroad sites, whether the “rolling iron cage” that housed the convict lease crew (Oshinsky 59), the Jim Crow car, or the sharecropper’s farm that produced raw materials transported by rail, were sites of capture. Henry Thomas’s railroadin’ sights and sounds puncture the network of oppressive forces by writing (riding) them out of the song, by running them over. His protest begins, however, in the devices that allow Thomas such hole-punching aeration power. And it begins with a turn away from the labor boundaries imposed by the sharecropping system.

Thinking of farming-knowledge as a site of discourse, like the railroad, wrapped up in elements of technological advance, tradition, jargon, and artistry (an *ars agricultura*), Pete Daniel notes that black voices were excluded. Although “[s]ome blacks managed to farm better than whites,” this mere fact, as noted in government reports, “produced tension, and broke down the conventional wisdom about black inferiority” (Daniel 193). The enforced silence and suppression of ability froze many black farming families in positions of extreme subordination. The deep-seeded immobility built into the sharecropping system was exposed in the public transcript when the Agricultural Adjustment Administration sent aid to southern farming communities in the early 1930s. The aid threatened the planters’ enforcement of immobility on the families: “Many rural people had never been far from their homes, and they had relied on their communities in hard times. [...] Planters encouraged their workers to become dependent, continuing the paternalism that had characterized slavery times” (Daniel 89-90). The imposed isolation froze up a potential communication network whereby the sharecroppers might have communicated their plight to one another or to the nation and its governmental authorities.

Henry Thomas's story reveals the power of the railroad to shake black voices loose, to free black bodies from sharecropping plots/plights. He was born in 1874 in Upshaw County, Texas, "the son of former slaves who worked as sharecroppers, one of nine children who grew up in a shanty on a bleak northeastern Texas cotton plantation" (Barlow 61). For a family like Thomas's, the debt peonage sharecropping system paralyzed the bodies in its thrall. His parents were former slaves who borrowed for their large family household goods and farming equipment against unstable crop yields. The most severely subjugated tenants were those "who had to have everything furnished to them" and, as a result, "paid a large portion of the crop to the landlord" (Garon and Tomko 20). These sharecroppers were locked, via farm implements, to the land of a particular landlord, often striving to make up "exaggerated and false furnishing costs" on the worst land (Garon and Tomko 21). Henry Thomas grew up in a world bound by these terms.

Community musicians, even within the bounds of an isolated farm, had access to a common language of escape in the train sounds that tore across the farmland. If distances were limited to worn paths between cabin and field, between cabin and company store, the approaching and fading train whistle spoke of elsewhere.<sup>92</sup> The railroad invaded the hyper-locality of the sharecropper's farm with the sounds of the metropolitan corridor. McCormick notes that Thomas lived in the vicinity of Big Sandy where two railroads crossed, providing "access to the rest of the world," leading, as they did, to "a host of towns that were beginning to show electric lights and offered jobs with a weekly pay envelope. Cities like Dallas (104 miles) and Shreveport (88 miles) had entire districts set aside for saloons and whorehouses and

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<sup>92</sup> According to Calt and Wardlow, the sharecropper's living quarters carry with them the institutions of both slavery and the railroad: "The thousands of acres under cultivation within Dockery's were parceled into subplots for tenant families, with each family cabin (or boxcar; some tenants actually lived in abandoned railway cars) spaced forty or sixty acres apart – a scheme originally introduced on Mississippi plantations decades previously to reduce incidents of 'immorality' among slaves" (Calt 13). Again, the spectacle of entrapment inscribes the train in the dominant discourse, another challenge for musicians to overcome when they re-imagine and retell train spaces.

musicians. And to the north there was Kansas City, St. Louis, Chicago” (McCormick). “Railroadin’ Some” tells this story, redrawing the map in terms of train stops and rail lines without regard for land ownership, even in terms of statehood. The railroad junction destabilized the sharecropper’s boundaries – just as the hobo will be shown to destabilize segregation boundaries – extending the possibilities of labor, inviting the role of entertainer, of message carrier.<sup>93</sup>

To return briefly to DeFord Bailey, the microphone function of the southern black musician opened up rail lines of sonic escape, but the musician also had to master an instrument, a device, to enact and perform the escape. For Bailey the instrument was a harmonica, a self-furnished piece of equipment that existed outside of the sharecropping system and thus pulled its player into an economy of self-employment. Baker links the oppressively durative setting of the Jim Crow South with the sense of possibility proclaimed by railroad playback: “The durative – transliterated as lyrical statements of injustice, despair, loss, absence, denial, and so forth – is complemented in blues performance by an *instrumental energy* (guitar, harmonica, fiddle, gut-bucket bass, molasses jug, washboard) that employs locomotive rhythms, train bells, and whistles as onomatopoeic references” (7; emphasis added). Translating railroad sounds through a musical instrument not only allowed the player to access modern energy; such playing allowed the musician to tap into a language of direct, ongoing response to a landscape attempting to silence his/her voice. For Murray, “the actual voices of which all blues instrumentation is an extension speak primarily and definitively as well in the idiomatic accents and tonalities of U.S.

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<sup>93</sup> The possibility of moving in multiple directions, of changing direction suddenly, calls to mind Baker’s interest in “the black blues singer at the railway junction lustily transforming experiences of a durative (unceasingly oppressive) landscape into the energies of rhythmic song. The railway juncture is marked by transience. Its inhabitants are always travelers – a multifarious assembly in transit. The ‘X’ of crossing roadbeds signals the multidirectionality of the juncture and is simply a single instance in a boundless network that redoubles and circles, makes sidings and ladders, forms Y’s and brackets over the vastness of hundreds of thousands of American miles. Polymorphous and multidirectional, scene of arrivals and departures, place betwixt and between [...], the juncture is the way-station of the blues” (7). Big Sandy was just such a blues junction for Henry Thomas.



Negroes down South, [especially the] locomotive talk of the old steam-driven railroad trains as heard by downhome blackfolk on farms, in work camps, and on the outskirts of southern towns” (118). The human voice is joined, complemented, by the voice of the instrument. “Railroadin’ Some” makes this clear in Thomas’s alternating between instrumental and sung passages, each speaking the sounds of the railroad, extending the power of modern movement to the player and his playing.

Henry Thomas performs “locomotive onomatopoeia” in “Railroadin’ Some” with a quills and guitar, two self-furnished railroad instruments worth studying closely. Barlow calls the quills (or panpipe or syrinx) “a likely precursor to the harmonica” originating in its homemade cane-reed form from an African-American folk tradition (61). McCormick takes an even longer view, calling the panpipe “one of the most ancient of all instruments.” It is the prominent piping sound that Thomas uses to “punch out the melod[y]” in “Railroadin’ Some” (McCormick). These commentators hear strains of a folk past, and the picture they collectively sketch of Henry Thomas is one of a pre-modern, if eclectic, songster. McCormick finds the twenty-three recorded songs of “goodtime music” to reach out “from another era: reels, anthems, stomps, gospel songs, dance calls, ballads, blues and fragments compressed in a blurring glimpse of black music as it existed in the last century. It’s the songs that came out of the shifting days when freedmen and their children were remaking their lives in a hostile nation” (McCormick). Paul Garon goes so far as to say that “[Thomas’s] style held nothing of the modern, but was made up of bits and piece of blues, reels, vaudeville and popular songs lines from ballads and anything else that would fit in the pot” (112). Listening again to “Railroadin’ Some,” however, one finds the song to be nothing *if not* modern. In addition to the lyrical content, the song *sounds* the train the speaker is riding from Texas to Chicago. The ancient panpipe plays back DeFord Bailey’s kind of microphone-

recorded train sounds, and I would argue that Thomas's style, thus, is highly, innovatively modern. The syncopated rhythm of the industrial age blasts from the quills, accelerating the speaker and listener across hundreds of miles of national space.

As Baker, Murray, and Henry Thomas indicate, train sounds acted as a technological spark that led to innovations in instrument creation and acquisition and in rhythm creation. In some cases, including, most likely, Henry Thomas and his cane-reed quills, self-furnishing musicians created their own equipment. Whether fashioning a quills by hand or acquiring a guitar by railroad delivery, there was a decided trend during the 1890s and 1900s of a "new generation of young rural musicians," who "had a clear urge to innovate" (Peretti 18). Thomas's instrumental innovation was twofold, his refashioning the sound of the ancient quills to match the railroad train and his taking up the modern guitar to fill in the modern sound.

The railroad made musicianship imaginatively and physically possible: "An expansion of railroad lines [...] deliver[ed] a wealth of new consumer products into even previously remote areas of the South. [And] mail order catalogues from New York and Chicago firms opened a new world of consumer goods" (Miller 24). Among these goods was the guitar, a relatively recent American sound producer. David Evans, in giving a brief history of the guitar in the South, notes that it "arrived as a new instrument at the end of the nineteenth century in association with the new musical genres of ragtime, jazz, and blues, with an emerging cash economy, and with new attitudes in the black community toward social and economic survival adopted in response to an increase of racial oppression" (11). The guitar was a lightning rod of innovation, a novel sound machine in its own right. And the impact was of immediate proliferation, as "suddenly during the period of 1890 to 1910, the guitar is everywhere in the rural South, especially in black music and especially in the Deep South" (Evans 13). Like the railroad train, guitars carried with them a

sense of mobility, “because they were new, because they were paid for with cash, and because they carried an aura of urbanity, gentility, social status, and upward mobility, precisely because they were not rural and traditional” (Evans 13). Availability – through mail order catalogues like Sears Roebuck – and a clean symbolic slate made guitars ideal instruments for sharecroppers seeking to self-furnish their way out of the Jim Crow system. In “Railroadin’ Some” the guitar provides an undergirding railroad track for Thomas, a steady chugging sound, and so the guitar sound speaks its mode of transport.

Similarly, Thomas’s conductor calls, his blues voice, speaks his mode of transport: free-riding the rails. If musical innovation derived from and respoke the southern railroad, the musicians were playing the modern blues idiom to match the modern legal idiom and the segregative innovations of southern states’ legislatures. In a further iteration of the railroad’s power to furnish, oral histories of southern musicianship are rife with tales of the trains carrying the musician-hoboes during the early decades of the twentieth century.<sup>94</sup> I will be concentrating on Thomas, but most country blues artists who came of age in the teens, twenties, and thirties seem to have experienced the life of “riding the rails.” McCormick encountered this fact while trying to uncover oral histories of Thomas: “The trainmen talked not about individuals but rather they painted the musicians in as part of the scene in that era when the Texas & Pacific was famous for the elegant maintenance of its rolling stock, and the big steam engines drifted out of the yards with lamps and cylinder heads gleaming” (McCormick). Railroad technology was inscribed with itinerant musicians who were developing innovative methods to tap into the powerful machine – even as states like Texas were attempting to contain their mobility.

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<sup>94</sup> Peretti shows a connection between “riding the rails” and the inspiration of train sounds for jazz musician Mezz Mezzrow who, “[w]hile riding underneath freight cars,” “would ‘dig ... the riffs the wheels were knocking out.’ Musicians were obsessed with rhythm” (108).

Notable in the travelogues of blues musicians are two elements: the self-furnished mobility gained by sneaking onto and off train and the network of music communication created when musicians visited small towns along the rail lines. If the railroad spaces and sensations created room for protest as sites of hidden transcript production, the blues musicians were the figures that collected and reproduced those transcripts. They, as much as the trains that disseminated them, were railroad carriers. Seen as such, blues performers play a crucial role within Scott's theory: "to think of antihegemonic discourse as occupying merely the social space left empty by domination would be to miss the struggle by which such sites are won, cleared, built, and defended. The elaboration of hidden transcripts depends not only on [their social sites] but also on active human agents who create and disseminate them" (123). The hidden transcripts that itinerant bluesmen carried with them extended the train sounds and rhythms into a guitar-based blues idiom, and they spread the message of escape from sharecropping labor.

"Railroadin' Some" depicts such a lifestyle, with its itinerary of place names spilling across state (and Jim Crow) lines: Texas to Oklahoma to Kansas to Missouri to Illinois to Indiana to Illinois. Thomas's ability to invade, disrupt, and undermine segregation law is apparent both in the imagined, sung journey and in his real-life physical presence in a variety of train spaces. McCormick's account illustrates the musician's freedom of movement: "He was a wanderer, they've said, who moved casually over the country, making great looping trips outward into other states, but invariably returning to his familiar home grounds. [...] People remember him coming back to brag that he'd been to see the Chicago Columbian Exposition of 1893 and the St. Louis World's Fair of 1904" (McCormick).<sup>95</sup> The ex-colored man makes forays between national

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<sup>95</sup> Thomas, a predecessor and participant in Peretti's "new generation," grew up into hobo-hood, responding to the railroad as it spanned the spaces around him: "The railroads had irrevocably altered the pattern of rural life, and farm boys grew up hopping on and off slow freights, if only to ride a few miles up or down the line. As he grew older, he rode further" (McCormick). Honeyboy Edwards tells a similar story, attributing his hobo education to his

(and international) spaces, but Johnson's narrative fixes him in the North (and in a white identity) by the end of the novel. Thomas traveled to the North and returns to the South, a performance of excessive mobility that gets built into his message sung to southern audiences.

Even more deviant was Thomas's ability to play his way into passenger cars on the trains he rode. One of McCormick's Texas trainmen explains the exchange: "That guitar was his ticket so far as I was concerned. The company didn't lose any money" (McCormick). The guitar itself was a device for mobility – not only in the sonic space of the song, but in the real landscape of the Texas train system. Tellingly, McCormick finds that Thomas did not rely on the caprice of conductors (who, after all, were negotiating the capricious color line). He was equipped with a groove mechanism: "But where free passage was denied there were always the methods of the ordinary hobo: empty gondolas and box cars, the blind end of baggage cars, and the brass rods beneath the cars. Henry Thomas, it's remembered, always carried a 'ticket board' – a flat piece of wood *grooved to fit a brass rod* – for occasions when he had to ride the rods" (McCormick). One imagines hobo musicians carving the groove with the same hands that carve out a guitar groove. Each device, in the stories told of Ragtime Texas, becomes a ticket, a ticket earned by grooving. Dinerstein writes of "the American groove" created by the "basic elemental propulsive force and rhythmic riffs" (72-73), and Thomas, in song and lived experience, produced just such a groove in direct opposition to the strict itinerary of the Jim Crow South. Listening carefully, with attention paid to the spaces being ragged and grooved, one finds the oppositional message entering a variety of venues. One hears them reverberate outward into the southern landscape.

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musical mentor Joe Williams. Learning to ride the rails is one aspect, on this view, of learning to play the guitar. The two activities blur together in Edwards's telling: "I stayed with Joe until I got plum good. [...] He knew everywhere, knew every train. [...] We hustled – we gambled with them guitars. [H]e kept me out of the field. He changed my life and I'm glad of it" (Edwards 41, 42, 43). Edwards, later in his narrative, emphasizes the connection between his instruments and his mobility: "The guitar kept me rolling a whole lot. I went everywhere I wanted to go. But I wouldn't stay nowhere long. I'd be in a town, not be intending to go anywhere, take up my guitar and start to playing, and think, 'Well, it's time to move on out of here.' I'd start to thinking about somebody who's somewhere else and I'd get up and go. I'd have my harp and my guitar and hit the road" (74-75).

Starting in the train cars, another trainman anecdote gathered by McCormick carries imagery of the kind of cross-color-line shock depicted in the ex-colored man's ragtime party scene. The shock gets doubly delivered to white sensibilities: explicitly from black expression into white bodies shocked into movement; and implicitly from a reality of intermixing into the fictive Jim Crow racial order shocked into chaos. The following anecdote, reported to McCormick from a "a retired conductor named G. T. Hardy who used to work the passenger trains out of Dallas" shows "Ragtime Texas" Thomas again ragging Texas:

Hardy described one occasion when, after waving [Thomas] on board, he noticed the train didn't have the usual number of children running amuck in the aisles. Then he came across "Ragtime Texas" up front in one of the white coaches with all the youngsters gathered around him. "I found him up there picking guitar, singing, playing that whistle-business, and letting out *whoops* to where he had half-a-dozen youngsters dancing up at the front of the car." (McCormick)

The scene is striking, to say the least. It recalls the radical possibilities inherent to, in one example, Uncle Remus's relationship to his white boy listener. But rather than carry the child safely to his/her parents' house at the end of the story, the sung story carries the child away from his/her accustomed space and at the syncopated pace set by Thomas and his "whistle-business." It is hard to imagine a scene more challenging to the color line than a black musician "letting out *whoops*" in the front of the white car, the hyper-protected class of children cut loose from the moorings of the color line. Although the story is a unique one – "Most of the time, 'Ragtime Texas' stayed farther back in the train, in the smoking car or beyond in the coach designated 'For Colored'" (McCormick) – it illustrates a spectacle of resistance to the Jim Crow system, precisely due to Thomas's ability to carve grooves into the structure of segregation.<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> Hardy also claims to have denied Thomas passage for occasional hygienic failings: "I'd always carry him except when he was too dirty" (McCormick). But notice that the always/except is emphatically not never/except. Thomas seems to have set the standard for his passage, rather than the conductor (and Jim Crow) setting it for him. And as DeFord Bailey reminds us, one always has access to "makeup."

Leaving the train, we step onto the station platform and into a zone of passenger intermixing that proved most difficult to control. If the train cars and station buildings contained walls and partitions, the platform was, by necessity, open. Train lengths varied, and the rhythm of boarding and alighting was never fully captured by Jim Crow legislation. Indeed, the original moment of blues inspiration cited by W. C. Handy, the self-nominated “father of the blues,” happened on a train depot platform and involved the recording of an itinerant bluesman:

Then one night at Tutwiler (Mississippi), as I nodded in the railroad station while waiting for a train that had been delayed nine hours, life suddenly took me by the shoulder and wakened me with a start. A lean, loose-jointed Negro had commenced plunking a guitar beside me while I slept. His clothes were rags; his feet peeped out of shoes. His face had on it some of the sadness of the ages. As he played, he pressed a knife on the strings in a manner popularized by Hawaiian guitarists who used steel bars. The effect was unforgettable. His song, too, struck me instantly. “Goin where the Southern cross’ the Dog.” The singer repeated the line three times, accompanying himself on guitar with the weirdest music I had ever heard. The tune stayed in my mind. [...] He was simply singing about [a station down the line where two rail lines cross] as he waited. (74)

The simplicity of the lyrics belied the transportative power of the instrumentation (Hawaii!), indications at once of the exoticism of the guitar and its position in rail commerce. Despite the rags and the way the man’s face was marked by the “sadness of the ages,” the Tutwiler bluesman was a modern. He grooved into Handy a song that remained in the listener’s mind, “weird[] music” that “struck” him “instantly.” The bluesman grooved his song into Handy’s memory (and soon to be renowned repertoire) with repetition as much as his new (to Handy) “plunking” sound. Once again a junction gets sung into a blues song: Handy failed to recognize the names of the rail lines; is it possible he failed to hear the sound of the train in the otherwise empty station? “He was simply [...]” reveals Handy’s syncopated catch-up.

Despite the mythological tone of the story, the Tutwiler bluesman was in reality a persistent figure at train stations. McCormick's research of Thomas turns up a consistent sound of blues music:

I ran down a number of older trainmen looking for one who might remember Henry Thomas, but most of what they remembered was that there used to be a guitar player hanging around every depot up and down the line. They described not one but dozens of men who used to hang around the domino parlor or some across-the-tracks tavern until train time when, with everyone else in town, they'd come over to the depot. Wherever the train stopped it was commonplace to look across the platform and see one or two musicians in the crowd. (McCormick)

Though the railroad experience was written into racial order by the Jim Crow laws of the turn-of-the-century South, and though the degraded state of Jim Crow cars inscribed black bodies with a degraded status, the example set by blues musicians – and remembered by the arbiters of Jim Crow, the conductors and train employees – was one of countermobility. The musicians jumped into the open spaces, jumping (*vaulting*) Jim Crow like Thomas's speaker jumps into St. Louis, and so created a counter-sensorium: the sights and sounds of black expression, music that carried. Their performances wokeup their listeners and inscribed grooves in their memories.

As is evident in the scenes depicted above, train spaces, if trespassed upon, opened up performance venues within southern communities. Such sites, in which hidden transcripts are “practiced, articulated, enacted, and disseminated,” are necessarily “in themselves an achievement of resistance; they are won and defended in the teeth of power” (Scott 119). Moving from the train station into other social venues inside southern towns, we find musicians have carried their musical insubordination into the streets. They maintained elusiveness, though. Scott writes: “The creation of a secure site for the hidden transcript might [...] not require any physical distance from the dominant so long as linguistic codes, dialects, and gesture – opaque to the master and mistresses – were deployed” (Scott 121). If a white listener gets caught up in the



panorama of “Railroadin’ Some,” that listener might miss the integrated-travel groove of the song, especially if the song is played live. In this way Thomas’s reimagined rail travel invades the southern sensorium. Syncopation works by invasion: moving notes into off-beats and slipping into melodies earlier than expected. Thus blues expression, an appropriation of railroad language, sites/sights and sounds, makes otherwise segregated spaces “secure” in blues songs’ opaque deployment. Just as sexuality could be expressed in songs rife with double entendre, racial mobility could be expressed and explored along rail lines.<sup>97</sup>

Honeyboy Edwards recounts public performances during brief stops in an ever-revolving tour of southern towns. Around 1931 Kokomo Arnold arrived, via train, in Greenwood, Mississippi near where Edwards’s family was sharecropping. Arnold played around town, on street corners, before leaving town just as suddenly and mysteriously. “I don’t know which way he went. [...] He was hustling and made a lot of nickels, dimes, and quarters. He was a traveling musician, trying to make it, hoboining around, catching freight trains, and laying around in town till the next train came through” (34). Edwards was sparked into taking a similar path after his tutelage with Joe Williams, jumping on and off freight trains and making his way into one after another southern town: “And in all them little towns I went to there was always people wanted to hear music. I’d sit by the train depot and people would gather around and throw me nickels” (72). The railroad brought into the towns themselves protest against the debt peonage farming system, against a life of stagnation and deprivation. The message contained, as well, a lesson on the creation of a self-subsistent economy. Scott identifies carriers of hidden transcripts as

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<sup>97</sup> Miller writes, “In a South dominated by Jim Crow and lynch law songs of protest or sexuality could be incredibly dangerous for African Americans to share with white listeners [...], result[ing] in blues artists developing separate repertoires to perform for black and white patrons, saving the explicit blues for the former and censoring their lyrics or using double entendres for the latter” (79). Angela Davis links sexuality and travel as similar forms of insubordinate promiscuity: “for people of African descent who were emerging from a long history of enslavement and oppression during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, sexuality and travel provided the most tangible evidence of freedom” (67).

“cultural brokers” who serve as “social links between subordinate communities” who develop autonomy by, in part, “depend[ing] directly on the patronage of a lower-class public to make their living” (124). The nickels and dimes thrown by local blacks (and whites) contributed to careers developed in direct self-employed response to sharecropping – or the more extreme version of economic capture that was convict lease labor.

Leaving the streets and heading home, we arrive in the most insulated of railroad spaces: the private parlor. The appearance and mass-production of the phonograph allowed outside voices to enter private spheres. Indeed, the significance of the rise of blues recordings is notable in the ability of phonographic voices to penetrate cordoned-off spaces: “With the increasing mobility of material and symbolic commodities, the walls of the home become permeable, and private reception of [...] music [...] becomes the norm” (Peters 244). This mobility was generated by the railroad boom, as the mass-production of phonographs that began during the 1890s and 1900s found a preexisting nationwide rail network by which to transport the equipment and records. Sound, already re-imagined in response to the railroad, had a new mode of travel in the phonographic process: “The metaphysical marvel separated the voice from the body and enabled music to travel independently of musicians. It came to dominate the music industry by the early twentieth century” (Miller 3). The effect is double and hybrid.

Black blues musicians, like Edwards, received records in the mail, delivered along rail lines, and were sparked towards music careers. Honeyboy recounts that a guitar and a phonograph player arrived in his family around 1929, predating the family’s move to Greenwood and his access to the railroad circuit. “Sears Roebuck come out with that windup, and people could dance by it. My sister used to have a record by Blind Lemon Jefferson, ‘Blues Come from Texas.’ [He] was a big star back then. She used to play that song over and over again; we’d sit up

and listen to it all night” (27). Jefferson arrived in the Edwards home just as Kokomo Arnold later arrived by rail in Greenwood – each a sonic innovation guiding Honeyboy away from sharecropping. The train, and the proliferation of its blues sound in the form of phonograph records, brought blues sounds to black southerners in an everyday instance of self-furnishing.

The other side of the phonographic effect on the Jim Crow South was the way the sound carried into white domestic spaces. “When African American artists began making blues records in the 1920s, white southerners bought them in large numbers. Store ledgers from rural white neighborhoods reveal that blues records by the likes of Blind Lemon Jefferson sold just as well as those by white [artists]” (Miller 78). Jefferson and Thomas thus entered white homes as promiscuously as he entered black homes. The color line was undermined by the excessive mobility of black music, a phenomenon extending to the marketplace at large. Just as live performances taught audiences how to participate in an economy of self-employed musicians, “African Americans quickly developed their own word-of-mouth campaigns and distribution networks” (Miller 192).<sup>98</sup>

Contrary to the public transcript’s account of black southerners as controllable units of farm labor, record companies discovered a market for music consumption and production. Even the most rural spaces were being penetrated as early as 1920, as the phonograph trade publication “Talking Machine World” reported from “a Farm Life survey” in which “about one-third of surveyed households contained a phonograph. A survey in 1921 asked, ‘Do you think that musical instruments could be advertised and sold successfully to farm people through farm papers?’ Eighty-two percent of respondents answered yes. Rural America, the conclusion ran,

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<sup>98</sup> Miller notes that, according to an Okeh Records executive, “‘The porters on Pullman trains would make a fortune just by carrying the records out. They’d pay a dollar a piece for them. Sell them for two dollars, because the Negroes in the South had the money’” (192). The Pullman porter is a train figure left out of this thesis (except for a cameo in *Autobiography*), but Miller’s research indicates a clear link between blues music, trains, and the porters.

was primed for market development” (Miller 199). Black voices, initially tuned to railroad sounds, by the 1920s and 1930s had leaked into the white sensorium. As an Okeh salesman reported to his superiors, ““The southern whites will buy them like nobody’s business. They understand blues and jazz songs, for they’ve heard blind-men on street-corners in the South playing guitars and singing ’em for nickels and dimes ever since their childhood days” (Miller 200). The sound of the train carried into sharecroppers’ homes and catalyzed innovative playback by black listeners. Those listeners became players of railroad sound who innovated their own distribution paths as railroad hobos before carrying the sound of their railroad songs into the streets and homes of southern towns. When Henry Thomas traveled to Chicago to sing, at the end of “Railroadin’ Some,” his celebratory incantation *Chicago!* reached thousands of listeners’ homes via the Vocalion record.

#### IV. CONCLUSION: A RAILROAD STUDIES JUNCTION

This thesis has traced rail lines – but it has not been as far reaching as its subject matter. The geographic, gendered, and temporal limits imposed have allowed for a finer focus, but reexamining the railroad in its broader contexts would produce fascinating new directions for the topic. I have intended to show how the railroad ran two trains during the Nadir: one built by the socio-legal demands of the white Jim Crow South; and one built by the imaginative demands of the South’s suppressed black populace. I have thought of these building projects as innovative outgrowths competing for open territory in the southern landscape. Segregation laws, first inscribed on local railroad spaces by *de facto* practices and then on the nationwide railroad network by the *de jure* segregation that led to and followed from *Plessy*, were responses to a kind of sensorial and social modern shock. The cultural expressions of Charles Chesnutt, James Weldon Johnson, and Henry Thomas drew on this reservoir of modern energy: their railroad performances re-examined and re-imagined those same railroad spaces and, in doing so, challenged the structure of Jim Crow and the logic of the color line.

Mobility has been investigated in terms drawn from Scott’s concept of hidden-transcript counterideology – as countermobility: movement that spoke, in its very performance of motion, against societal restrictions. The modern sensorium, too, provided room for protest, and the performances examined here worked to create counter-sensoria: evocatively imagined spaces that undermine the stable spaces imagined within the dominant discourse. “It was the blues singers’ job,” writes Paul Garon, “to represent and recreate the world” (9). In “Railroadin’ Some” we hear Thomas’s efforts to re-draw the map of the United States to suit his interests. The

speaker leaves Fort Worth at the beginning of the song, but after twenty-two lines, at the end of the second stanza, Thomas sings out that we “double back to Fort Worth” before beginning our journey north. He thus creates a willful jaunt through Texas. McCormick notes that this initial “round trip through East Texas is unessential and it seems fair to interpret it as a nostalgic visit to familiar places and home” (McCormick). Thomas doesn’t take us on a direct path from Fort Worth to Chicago: he takes us to places he wants to go, and he brings his home territory into the Chicago studio.

Notably, McCormick calls the entry into Chicago itself a “fantasy”: “[Thomas] seems to be entering the city simultaneously by three different routes. [...] It’s a montage of arrivals in Chicago where [...] he’s perhaps taken all the previous trips he’s made to the city and compressed them into one dramatic if impossible sequence, topped off by the panpipes blowing Chicago a bright, joyous salute” (McCormick). We encounter the Chicago grooved by Thomas. In this way, the bluesman gives an account of his unaccountability: “I’m on my way but I don’t know where,” he sings at the end of the first stanza. “Railroadin’ Some” reflects Thomas’s own path from sharecropper’s plot to Chicago recording studio. Thomas found an avenue of communication along the railroad tracks of Texas, and he communicates, through guitar, quills, and voice, counter-mobility. He creates a counter-sensorium in his performance of train sensation under the command of a black engineer/conductor/passenger/tycoon.

Murray, in identifying the blues as “counter-agent” built into black Americans’ “equipment for living,” speaks to an apparatus of survival that seeks paths of communication. Baker finds the “signal expressive achievement of blues” to arise from, in part, “the unsettling demographic fluidity” and “boundless frontier energy” flowing from musician to listener. Thomas wheels his listener across the map, reaching, even, into the “Territory.” What seems

crucial is the ability of a message to *jump* from performer to audience. The movement might be directly contagious – as in the case of dancers at a live performance – or might more generally infect witnesses across wide swaths of land. “Demographic fluidity” and “frontier energy” reached out for technological innovations by which to create new paths of communication amongst African-American communities. We have seen how blues musicians created such networks along rail lines. Honeyboy Edwards discusses the way he moved: “I’d play for a while in one little town and jump and go to another place.” (74). Jumping Jim Crow seems to lurk in America’s railroad paths – disrupting as often as he is used to dominate and disfigure.

One might, then, look for moments when paths of communication, rather than sought, were *cut*. I have written of Thomas laying tracks and carving grooves, but his method of counter-mobility does not preclude a violent stroke of trailblazing. In response to the terroristic methodology of white southerners, some black performances cut directly, a painful splice, into transportation and communication pathways. Cable recognized the spectacle performed by the railroad as segregated space “rid[ing] up and down that beautiful land dominating and domineering” (25). Hobos free-riding the rails were still riding tracks that carried in their contours the suppression of freedom. In a more direct response to this domination, the black folk tradition contains in its contours an anti-John Henry character called Railroad Bill, based on real life outlaw Morris Slater.

Slater was a turpentine worker in the pinewoods of Escambia County Alabama, who, in 1893, “shot and killed a policeman during an argument and escaped on a freight train” (Levine 410). Slater became a train robber who, depending on accounts, gave food to poor blacks or equally terrorized everyone. He worked the railroad with his powerful body, but not as a John Henry. Slater wreaked violent havoc on railways, disrupting the passage of goods, jumping trains

not as a hobo but as a Jim Crow marauder. He was killed, for a reward, in 1896 – the same year the Supreme Court decided *Plessy* (Levine 411). Slater’s story passed into the legend of Railroad Bill as it was transmitted from community to community. It became woven into the conjure-tale tradition, the same tradition evoked by Charles Chesnutt’s *The Conjure Woman* (1899), and came to perform a counter-mobility that cut a lawbreaking groove into the railroad imaginary.

Lawrence Levine describes the tales:

Numerous stories insisted that he had been able to elude his pursuers for three years because he was a conjure man and could transform himself when threatened by the law. With posses close behind him, he would turn himself into a sheep, a brown dog, a red fox and watch them ride by. Even after he was killed there were those who, in the tradition of outlaw legends, refused to believe that he was dead; he merely had transformed himself once again and was still watching his pursuers with amusement. (Levine 411)

Here is an elusiveness beyond Henry Thomas’s rail hopping, an elusiveness that threatens white authority in its wild and powerful transfigurations. A song likely known to Ragtime Texas but left out of his recording session, “Railroad Bill” represents a form of train communication that opens the railroad to the study of black violence doled out to meet white violence.<sup>99</sup> Remember that the tracks were laid with the blood of convict lease labor, that they transported lynch posses and audiences, and that they hosted those acts of violence.<sup>100</sup>

Extending into other paths of public transportation made into paths of public communication, one might also look for protest along the sidewalks laid in the burgeoning city spaces of the turn-of-the-century South. Jane Dailey as part of her article on the Danville,

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<sup>99</sup> “Railroad Bill cut a mighty big dash; / Killed McMillan like a lightnin’-flash. / En he’ll lay yo po body down. / Railroad Bill was a desprit sport, / Shot all those buttons off that head brakeman’s coat. / Ain’t it sad! / Railroad Bill so mean an’ so bad, / Till he tuk ev’ything that farmer had, / It’s that bad Railroad Bill. / Railroad Bill so desp’rate an’ so bad, / He take ev’ything po’ womens had, / An’ it’s that bad Railroad Bill” (qtd. in Levine 411). Josh Green in *Marrow* gets written into a similar role. He aims his capacity for bodily harm at Captain McBane, and his hobo ride into town leads, eventually, to his burying a knife up to its hilt in McBane’s chest.

<sup>100</sup> For a treatment of the relationship between southern violence and the African American musical tradition, with attention paid to W. C. Handy and Honeyboy Edwards, see Adam Gussow, *Seems Like Murder Here: Southern Violence and the Blues Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).



Virginia massacre of 1883, centers her analysis on the idea that “particularly for people (such as women and racial and religious minorities) whose identities have traditionally been defined spatially, as ‘place,’ the act of appropriating public space – whether on a New South city sidewalk or on a Jim Crow streetcar – is a political and subversive act” (557-8). The perception that blacks in Danville were derailing, so to speak, whites off the pedestrian walkways exploded into a violent response by the white population. Like railroad station platforms, Jim-Crow-era sidewalks “remained a juncture between overt and covert resistance, and the encounters between the races on the public streets revealed the incomplete dominance of white supremacy. While the color line could be drawn with precision on trains and in theaters, one’s position on the public streets and sidewalks was always ambiguous” (Dailey 587). We have seen how trains and tracks can move in more than one direction, and Dailey seems quick to seal off trains and movie theaters (one imagines theaters, as well, providing a blurred venue of physical restraint and imaginative freedom), but she usefully calls attention to other modern sites of control and resistance, of capture and escape.

Just as the ex-colored man’s delight in free motion seems almost to elicit the lynching that blocks his railroad path between southern towns, the new, increasing mobility of Danville blacks elicited a horrific response from local whites. The Wilmington riot that prompted Chesnut to write *The Marrow of Tradition* is a similar story. Southerners, white and black, cut violent paths into their landscape, mirroring the industrial advances made by northern capital during the postbellum years. The stories extend into the Civil Rights Era – and into the spaces of city buses and streetcars. Railroad Bill transforms himself, in Robin Kelley’s view, into young, black Birmingham passengers “who put on public displays of resistance that left witnesses in awe, though their transgressive acts did not lead directly to improvements in conditions, nor were

they intended to” (*Race* 66). Public space was physically grappled for, and countermobility – viewed in this thesis as movement in protest of restraint – comes to counteract the mobility of white passengers. On the South Bessemer streetcar line, “which passed some of the popular black dance halls, white passengers and operators dreaded the ‘unbearable’ presence of large numbers of African Americans who ‘pushed and shoved’ white riders at will. As one conductor noted, ‘negroes are rough and boisterous when leaving downtown dances at this time of night’” (49).

For all the thousands of miles of railroad track laid at the end of the nineteenth century there are multitudes of railroad experiences and expressions worth our attention. Railroad expression extends across the nation and through the layered eras of its growth. This conclusion has touched on only a couple of lines that run outward, namely the violence contained in the railroad tradition and the extension of performances to the spaces of sidewalks, streetcars, and buses. One might also read the role of railroad performance as a crucial step in the cultural resistance that takes root in the post-war Harlem Renaissance and covers the printing presses, radio airwaves, and television screens of a nation striving towards Civil Rights. Homer Plessy, Charles Chesnutt, James Weldon Johnson, Henry “Ragtime Texas” Thomas, W. C. Handy, Honeyboy Edwards, and Railroad Bill were freedom riders in a tradition that extends from those escaping slavery by the Underground Railroad to the Freedom Riders of the 1950s and 60s.

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