

Rivers, Roads and Conveyor Belts: The making of America(n poetry)

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Abstract

This paper describes the chronotope of modular time-space in the infrastructure of early twentieth-century New York and in literary and cinematic depictions of the city. It argues that most international modernist lyric poetry placed its speakers outside of the flow of time in space. Critics view modular time-space as particularly antithetical to personal identity. But the African American Langston Hughes and the feminist immigrant Mina Loy situated their poems within the flow of time in space, and used modular time-space to demonstrate racism and sexism in American society, arguing for the inclusion of women and African Americans in social discourse.

Keywords: chronotope, lyric poetry, New York, Chaplin, Hughes, Loy, Whitman, Halpern, Lorca

When time becomes visible in Charlie Chaplin's 1936 film, *Modern Times*, it is incarnate in the conveyor belt over which Charlie Chaplin's little tramp is bent at the Electro Steel Corp. Each fragment of a second, denoted by the regular appearance of a bolt under the tramp's wrench, fixes the assembly-line worker's position in space and his movement in time. Each second is identical to the one before it and the one that will follow. For the tramp, time is abstract, detached from an organic context, unmoored from a past cause and a future effect, and without a narrative to explain and anchor it, since the tramp will never see the finished product of his labor. He experiences time as an eternal now, since it has no lineal or narrative progression; it is a now divided into identical increments, each interchangeable with the one before.

Each increment of time that moves down the conveyer belt of the factory circumscribes the tramp's physical location and his activity. His task is to stand in one place before a belt that conveys the bolts he is meant to tighten. But when he wishes to convey his own

ideas, peppering his argument with gesticulations, the belt continues to move along, carrying the bolts he should have been tightening. The tramp, who has literally fallen behind, must dash to the belt's end, where he bumps against a second "practically rigid body of reference." This portly body, rigid with rage, belongs to his workmate, who cuffs him, and urges him forward. Thus, the tramp learns with practice what Einstein discovered through mathematics: there is no absolute space; there is only "an infinite number of spaces, which are in motion with respect to one another" (Einstein 139).

Thus, in the material world, his embodied being is at odds with his lyrical impulse to step out of the flow of time in space, to ignore the other bodies around him, to stop the flow of time in space with his voice. Only those who have the luxury of standing still, the foreman, the owner, the supervisor, can afford to regard the lineal narrative of the world, can imagine oneself a subject, not an object. But to stand still is to be outside of time and space.

The scene discussed above from *Modern Times* illustrates what I am calling the chronotope of modular time-space. I borrow the term *chronotope* from the Russian theorist, Mikhail Bakhtin, for whom it designates the fusing of time and space into a concrete whole in literary art (84). This is the literary version of what Einstein – whom Bakhtin cites – called "the space-time continuum" in his famous 1920 papers on the special and general theories of relativity. Bakhtin describes it thus: "Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history" (84).

I find it particularly helpful to talk about the new style of writing that emerges in 1920s New York in terms of genre, as defined by Bakhtin in his 1937–8 essay "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel," for this will clarify the meaning of the adjective "modern" in the film title *Modern Times*, as well as the word "lyrical" I have used to describe Chaplin's response to modern time. As Bakhtin's translators, Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson, point out, "a genre is neither a collection of devices nor a particular way of combining linguistic elements;" rather, it is "a specific way of visualizing a given part of reality" (275). Taking inspiration from Albert Einstein's theory of relativity, Bakhtin realized that the context for actions and events is shaped primarily by the kind of space and time that operate within them. Thus, literary genres are distinguished predominantly according to the ways they configure the shape and depicted experience of time. In other words, depicted time and space unite in very distinct and particular ways in different literary genres. Bestowing his signature on the modernist preoccupation with time, Bakhtin sees the chronotope as "the place where the knots of narrative are tied and untied. It can be said without qualification that to them belongs the meaning that shapes narrative" (250). Indeed, the chronotope of modular time and space shapes the narrative of Chaplin's *Modern Times* so intimately that time/space becomes the antagonist of the film.

In this paper, I wish to demonstrate the innovative use to which two poets put the modular chronotope in creating modernist lyric poetry firmly grounded in time-space, not outside of it. The poetry of Langston Hughes and Mina Loy, which depicts sexism and racism temporally and spatially, argues against the social and civic limitations of racist and sexist America. Their poetry engages chronotopic arguments for the inclusion of voices normally left out of American civic discourse. While other artists, secure in their social position, may lament the loss of identity that the chronotope of modular time-space signifies, for Loy and Hughes, this chronotope enables the very construction of self-consciousness and identity.

Indeed, standard depictions of modular time-space from this period are often antithetical to personal identity in film, architecture and poetry. In *Modern Times*, for example, footage of herds of sheep driven into a slaughterhouse are juxtaposed against images of workers flooding the factory hall. The scene in which Chaplin's worker falls into the cogs and wheels of the factory mechanism argues eloquently, if not very subtly, that modern time is brutal, destructive, and overwhelming to those who have no islands of property or wealth unto which they can escape to contemplate time's flow from afar. Time has moved from an unseen system of measurement to a dominant force that measures and quantifies its human creators. It can do this only insofar as it cleanses itself from particularity. It must become uniform and exchangeable, like money, as in the proverb "time is money."

If you were viewing *Modern Times* when it premiered in New York, you would recognize the infrastructure of modular time-space because, for more than a century and a half, it had been visible in such features as the street grid, which was superimposed on the island without regard for the island's topography. The grid erased geological time by leveling hills, razing valleys, felling forests and filling the lakes, as if the flat blades of a stopwatch had passed over the island, making each block equal and identical to every other block. Rem Koolhaas's appellation for the zoned and gridded New York of 1916, the "ghost-town of the future," extends the grid's demolition of organic difference in both temporal directions (108). Likewise, Frederick Taylor and Henry Ford's time studies and assembly line production models created a system in which each laboring human body was interchangeable with that of any other, regardless of age, race, language and religious creed, since each body's significance was exhausted in its performance of a given task at a predetermined uniform pace.

Like many popular literary works of international modernism, the film *Modern Times* reacts to the city's inhuman temporal and spatial architecture by privileging those moments in which the subject can turn away from the overwhelming flow of time in space, and the flow of space in time. The heart of *Modern Times* consists in those lyrical interludes in which the individual escapes from the normal flow of time in space, such as the little tramp's oil-can ballet above the fray of frantic workers who are unable to pursue the little man, since they are still held in thrall by the conveyor belts.¹ His love for the little gamin, celebrated in an abandoned shack on edge of the city's forgotten shore, removed from all traffic, temporal and spatial, returns Chaplin to humanity. In privacy (outside of the narrative flow of time in space) then, not in public circulation, is he a person, a man, a beloved and a lover. Thus, the "modern times" of the movie's title, so vividly portrayed therein, are, for all their comic value, somehow less "real" to little tramp and the viewers that identify with him than the timelessness of privacy. In the end, the film is "about" the triumph of the little guy, the proletariat, who is able to stop time – at least for a while – by shutting down the Electro Steel Corps and symbolically bringing the march of industrialism to a halt.

In poetry depicting big, modern, hyper-industrialized cities, such as New York, we see a similar conclusion: private identity can survive only outside of the flow of time in space. García Lorca's *Poet in New York*, published in 1929 is interesting in its recognition of a subsection of New York Americans who live below the flow of time in space – the residents of Harlem. They are able to retain their personal identities in Lorca's rendition of them, because they are noble primitives who simply do not understand time, space, and modern inventions.² Since they do not understand them, they do not accept them or

internalize them. The King of Harlem retains his identity, hidden though it is. Lorca's Wall Street, on the other hand, is pure space-in-motion, a consuming machine that de-personalizes all with whom it comes in contact. Lorca captures the dichotomy in a succinct couplet in the poem "King of Harlem":

¡Ay, Harlem disfrazada!
¡Ay, Harlem, amenazada por un gentío de trajes sin cabeza! (32)

[Ay, Harlem in disguise!
Ay, Harlem, menaced by a mob of headlines suits!]³

If one artistic response to the incompatibility of personal identity and modern time is an undermining of the external world, and a privileging of timeless interiority, another artistic response is a comical acceptance. For example, in prose fiction, Mark Anderson notes that the privileged mode of twentieth century narrative is the travel narrative. In it, the big city, late capitalism and increasingly fluid, shifting forms of property, seen through the lens of Einsteinian physics, engenders "a relativized perception of things in motion, of subtle or unconscious displacements of energy, fluctuating or ephemeral patterns of circulation and exchange." The traveling narrative replaces novels of landed property, in which identity was the dominant concern (98). Incessant circulation is, of course, destabilizing, and Anderson's traveling narrative stresses the incompatibility of moving space and personal identity. Anderson's exemplary travel narrative is Franz Kafka's *Amerika*.

Like *Modern Times*, *Amerika* is a comedy. Both derive their comic punch from the incongruence between the hero's expectations for recognition and the physical (temporal-spatial) reality that strips them of their personhood. The same can be said for Moyshe Leyb Halpern's *In New York*, published in Yiddish in 1919. The poem "Our Earth" details a city hewed from a rock by a hungry giant, which is an obvious allegory for industry. Here immigrant laborers are the "them," and the city/monster is the "he." The movement of the immigrants, like the movement of Chaplin's tramp, is in the service of capitalism, and, like the tramp, the immigrants are reduced to edible cogs of a machine.

And with a whip he braided for himself from tongues of fire,
he forces them (like wheels of a gigantic machine
that spin to the cadence of driven steam)
to prepare for him fresh food each morning.
And you, with glasses on your nose
and the forehead of an accounting artist,
stand in the middle of the night,
like a foreman in a factory
with pencil and paper.
And like a blind man counts the money he's begged—
count over, one by one, the children that are made
in this cliff city.
And mind that, of the semen, not one drop
shall be spilled in vain,
while the giant swings his fiery whip

and forces a million people of the world dragged together
 (like wheels of a gigantic machine
 that spin to the cadence of driven steam)
 to prepare for him fresh food each morning. (39–40)⁴

Sometimes space-as-motion narratives in American poetry can take advantage of the breakdown of the individual, however, and be used to forge a community. Unlike Kafka's *Amerika*, in which Karel, the main character, travels through the (to him, foreign) United States, slowly losing every vestige of identity he has, Walt Whitman's speaker praises travel and the subsequent breakdown of identity, which would set him apart from all others. The decomposition of the self enables him to join himself to the community of commuters on Brooklyn Ferry in the 1856 poem "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," creating what Benedict Anderson calls an "imagined community" (6), that of a democratic United States. Here the speaker translates himself fifty, one hundred years into the future, by virtue of the fact that two bodies moving along the same trajectory are interchangeable as well as by the fact that the reader is able to put herself in Whitman's place by reading his poem.

Just as you feel when you look on the river and sky, so I felt;
 Just as any of you is one of a living crowd, I was one of a crowd;
 Just as you are refresh'd by the gladness of the river and the bright flow, I was
 refresh'd;
 Just as you stand and lean on the rail, yet hurry with the swift current, I stood, yet was
 hurried;
 Just as you look on the numberless masts of ships, and the thick-stem'd pipes of
 steamboats, I look'd. (129)

In this passage, Whitman the speaker is returning from work on the Brooklyn Ferry, the symbolic final leg in the journey to Cathay, the fulfillment of Columbus' voyage around the world, as the poems with which this one is collected suggest. Furthermore, this particular poem is embedded in, and contextualized by, an expanding collection – one that increases with the growth of the United States and with the aging of the speaker, who participates in America's history by witnessing, nursing, celebrating, and recording. By extension, then, anyone who travels along Brooklyn ferry, anyone who *stands in Walt Whitman's space* becomes incorporated into the body of America. Sharing Whitman's *eye* allows one to exchange his or her *I* with Whitman. Although Whitman reluctantly saw the Brooklyn Bridge replace the ferry in 1883, he safeguarded the validity of its exchange value by writing the poem. Therefore, readers are able to travel virtually along Brooklyn Ferry with Whitman through the reading of the poem.

As the ferry draws near to the shore, all entities, the speaking I, the apprehensible you, and all the fluids and film between them, have merged. They are not exactly interchangeable; instead, they are one. The compass of the speaker's eye, its embrace of material formerly considered *treyf* – especially the physicality of the loving, procreating, decaying, sweating body, and those who earned their daily bread from their bodies – has merged with that of the speaking *I*. While such monologism is within the bounds of lyric poetry, is, indeed, a hallmark of romantic lyricism, it does pose a challenge to the idea of

interchangeability I seek to describe here. The addressee has been apprehended already, before he or she is born, by virtue of the fact that Whitman has written this poem anticipating that the addressee will read it “fifty, one hundred years hence.” The union of the speaker and the addressee happens outside of biological time, on the eternal pages of a poem. The speaker of the poem receives his identity from his body, it is true, but it is a body that is both inside time, and outside of it: the body is able both to “stand and lean on the rail, yet hurry with the swift/current” (129). This image of standing still while being in motion, at the same time is, in fact, one that Bergson uses in describing duration, which is the lived experience of time. It is internal precisely because it is not situated in space.

Now that I have proposed standard reactions to “modern times” or, rather “modernist time,” and its attendant standardization of space, I will turn to the chronotope of modular time, to show how it is used to assert identity in poems depicting marginalized characters. In the movie *Modern Times*, in the physical city grid of New York, in the travel novels, and the poetry I have discussed above (except for that of Whitman), time has been the dominant feature of each time-space unit. In contrast, in modular time-space, the spatial aspect of the chronotope is enhanced. In the poems below, spatial interchangeability is the key element to community membership. For, if two bodies are spatially interchangeable, mustn’t they also be equal? In other words, what becomes important is the ability to occupy common space. Langston Hughes creates a lyric *I* that recognizing the limits of its own subjectivity by testing the interchangeability of the *space* the *I* inhabits. This is, after all, one of the characteristics of the lyric *I*, to be a sort of placeholder that is effective as an *I* when a reader is able to imagine himself or herself in that place. The following poem is from Langston Hughes’ “A Negro Speaks of Rivers” taken from this 1926 debut collection *The Weary Blues*.

I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young.
I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep.
I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above it.
I heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln
went down to New Orleans, and I’ve seen its muddy
bosom turn all golden in the sunset. (23)⁵

Most critics believe that all Hughes is doing is creating a genealogy to connect him to Africa, and that the speaker in this poem is exercising a Whitman-esque transcendence of time and space here. It is certainly a legitimate move to see the “I” here as standing in for the whole of the Africa American community – in this sense, Hughes is repeating Whitman’s move, but for black America only. Indeed, all the rivers listed in the poem are sites of violence and forced labor, though only the Mississippi is mentioned (in *The Big Sea*) in conjunction with the slave trade.

But I am suggesting quite another interpretive move. There is nothing in the syntax of the poem to suggest we must read the “I” as a synecdoche for African Americans. In fact, a close reading of the poem will allow for ambiguity, will demand ambiguity. The people subsumed under the pronoun *I* might have built the pyramids, or they might have ordered the pyramids built. Does the speaker mean the Congo before the Belgian slave trade, or after? The slippage between referents allows us to read the poem both ways. Furthermore,

the idea in circulation in Hughes's time that the Euphrates was the site of the Garden of Eden, renders the Euphrates (the poem's origin) a symbol of the pre-racial dawn of humanity. All of the racial ambiguity here sets the stage for interchangeability of the speaker's I with that of the poem's contemporary reader. The audience for Hughes' poetry was as white as it was black.

The racial ambiguity of the speaker is enhanced by the circumstances surrounding the poem's birth. Langston Hughes recalls in *The Big Sea*, that this poem came to him as he was traveling by train from St. Louis to Mexico, to visit his father. While in Texas, he was given the opportunity to translate himself from a "Negro" to a "Mexican," thereby avoiding Jim Crow segregation laws, and securing for himself a very comfortable place in a Pullman sleeper. Rhetorically, Hughes's poem lays claim to civic equality: all rivers serve the same purpose (are interchangeable); human blood is like rivers. The ambiguity of the position of the speaker with regard to the river also reveals how arbitrary the grounds on which one human is enslaved and one is the slave, for we do not know if the speaker of the poem is the slave or the master until we get to the Mississippi. Reading the poem in the context by the collection in which it was published in 1926, *The Weary Blues*, the poem's genealogy makes the claim that the African American heritage in America is normative, not "other." And the claim is supported with a reference to Abraham Lincoln himself, presiding over the United States during the Civil War and acknowledging slavery to be a moral, social and political evil. Hughes' poem, insofar as it is a lyric, anticipates the reader's urge to identify with the "I" of the lyric, and turns that urge into a political statement. Because, obviously, white readers won't put themselves in the place of the speaker's I. Why not? Until all readers can identify with the speaker who is both black and white, something in America has to change.

Most of the poems in Langston Hughes's 1926 collection of poetry *The Weary Blues*, and also the 1927 *Fine Clothes to the Jew*, delineate the limits of the chronotope of modular time/space in an attempt to deploy it. A voice is always placed – even when (especially when) a speaker positions herself beyond time and space. For, to assume the position of universal speaker, from which all traces of individuality have been erased, means merely to assume the mask of the dominant social power – in Hughes's case, the "white man." This is why, in the essay "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," Hughes is so critical of the poet Countee Cullen, who says he wants to be "a poet" and not "a Negro Poet." According to Hughes, Cullen wants to ignore the place (Harlem, African American culture) and speak to white society. For when he says he wants to speak "to everyone" Hughes reminds him that the only place that white society recognizes is its own.

White American readers' inability to identify with Hughes's colored speaker is not just a metaphysical problem, but also a physical problem. The speakers of Hughes's poems are as restricted by space as the little Tramp in *Modern Times* is restricted by time. In order to be interchangeable, you have to be able to coexist in the same physical realm – that is, there cannot be segregation, for starters. Hughes points out the problem in his essay "My America":

Yet many Americans who cannot speak English—so recent is their arrival on our shores—may travel about the country at will securing food, hotel, and rail accommodations wherever they wish to purchase them. I may not. These Americans, once

naturalized, may vote in Mississippi or Texas, if they live there. I may not. They may work at whatever job their skills command. But I may not. They may purchase tickets for concerts, theaters, lectures wherever they are sold throughout the United States. I may not. They may repeat the Oath of Allegiance with its ringing phrase of “liberty and justice for all,” with a deep faith in its truth—as compared to the limitations and oppressions they have experienced in the Old World. I repeat the oath, too, but I know that the phrase about “liberty and justice” does not fully apply to me. I am an American—but I am a colored American. (*Langston Hughes Reader* 500)

LeRoi Jones explains Hughes’s predicament in his book *Blues People*:

What is so often forgotten in any discussion of the Negro’s ‘place’ in American society is the fact that it was only as a slave that he really had one. The post-slave society had no place for the black American, and if there were to be any area of the society where the Negro might have an integral function, that area would have to be one that he created for himself. (55)⁶

For a graphic explanation of the speaker’s of Hughes’ poetry, let us plot them on one of the chronotopes described by Mikhail Bakhtin, the chronotope of the road. In this chronotope, “the spatial and temporal paths of the most varied people – representatives of all social classes, estates, religions, nationalities, ages – intersect at one spatial and temporal point. People who are normally kept separate by social spatial distance can accidentally meet; any contract may crop up, the most various fates may collide and interweave with one another” (243). But this works only when each individual met on the road is recognized as an individual with a right to occupy space and a voice with which to meet the voices around him or her. If the road is an equalizer, collapsing social distance in Bakhtin’s schema, it is just this lack of personhood that is denied the African American speaker. When Hughes’s characters hit the road, they’re immediately lynched, as in the poem “Silhouette”:

Southern gentle lady,
Do not swoon
They’ve just hung a black man
In the dark of the moon.

They’ve hung a black man
To a roadside tree
In the dark of the moon

For the world to see
How Dixie protects
Its white womanhood.
Southern gentle lady,
Be good!
Be good! (305)⁷

Before some ethnicities or religions or individuals in America are able to even set foot on this kind of road, they first need to construct it.

The poem of modular time-space refuses assimilation into the cultural, social or linguistic norms of the world in which it occurs. But this does not happen because he or she finds the cultural, social or linguistic norms dehumanizing (as in the case of Chaplin's tramp). Rather, the speaking subject of this type of poem is not able to achieve subjectivity because his or her place in society is not recognized; his or her physical body is non-normative (Black, or female). That is, the speaking subject is only recognized in a spatially or temporally constricted unit that lies outside of social discourse – places where time does not flow, but rather, circles around its small, enclosed space. Take, for example, the following poem by Mina Loy, an English-born poet, artist and designer, one-time consort to the founder of Italian Futurism, Giovanni Papini, and immigrant to America. It is called "The Ineffectual Marriage":

Ding dong said the bell
Miovanni Gina called
Would it be fitting for you to tell
the time for supper
Pooh said Miovanni I am
Outside time and space

Patience said Gina is an attribute
And she learned at any hour to offer
The dish appropriately delectable

What had Miovanni made of his ego
In his library
What had Gina wondered among the pots and pans
One never asked the other
So they the wise ones eat their suppers in peace. (37)

Here the female Gina and the male Miovanni (a blending of the names Mina and Giovanni) are spatially relegated within the rooms of a single house. He, in the library, is "beyond time and space." She is in the kitchen cooking and cleaning. Like Lorca's "negroes of Harlem" disguised as doormen and cooks, Chaplin's factory worker/tramp and Hughes's kitchen boy in the poem "I, Too, Sing America," Gina acts according to the dictates of time (quotidian, biological). Her very spatial location will not allow her to overcome the temporal boundaries of her world. When the two characters intermingle, it is through labor – her production and his consumption of food. We see their physical separation graphically, in the blank spaces on the page. We also see hints that Gina is to Miovanni as one of the physical objects of the house – notice the position of the bell's utterance ("ding dong") directly over Gina's, and "said the bell" directly above "Gina called."

This depiction of the selfless woman, contented in her circular domesticity, is sharply dropped just after the "pet simplicities of [Gina's] universe/ where circles were only round/ having no vices" have "ranged themselves among her audacious happinesses." The poem

ends abruptly, in a parenthesis, “(This narrative halted when I learned that the house which inspired it was the home of a mad woman.

--Forte dei Marmi)” (39)

The fact that the narrative is written in third person, except for the observation that Gina is mad, deprives Gina of a voice twice over. First, her world permits her no subjectivity – her voice mimics the rhythm and the content of the clock, the “ding dong.” Even her “poems,” which she writes on the milk bill, are temporal markers, “Good morning” and “Good night.” Secondly, her madness would relieve her of even a limited, housewifely, membership in society. A mad person is, by definition, a person whose madness defines her; she has no other identity. At least in this poem, the madness is all we need to know about her. The poem breaks off as soon as we receive this fact.

Earlier I mentioned that chronotopes make useful indicators of genre. In calling Chaplin’s oil can ballet “lyrical” because it stopped the flow of time in space, I was thinking about Northrop Frye’s definition in “Theory of Genres,” for which he draws upon the etymology of *verse* as an agricultural term that meant to turn back at the end of the plowed row in a field. Since dominant post-Romantic critical practices which remain with us today have favored a lyric characterized by such generic features as an integrated, stable speaker who speaks as a private person outside the flow of time and space. Here “outside” would mean “beyond” time and space, or as a master of it, in the social sense. But, as this article has attempted to make clear, a mastery of the temporal and spatial public (or commercial) world is a pre-requisite to achieving self-consciousness of a private speaker. The lyric can accommodate poems that deliver a powerful critique of dominant social and cultural practices, but it can also become the literary arm of the American melting pot agenda of the 1910s and 1920s, which urged assimilation and uniformity, an adoption of an Anglo-Saxonized version of America.

What I am calling the chronotope of modular time-space seems to work so well as a social critique because it affords a kind of double vision. Not only do the speakers see themselves almost exclusively through the eyes of normative society, but they also see normative society for what it is. The forced physical interiority of Gina in Mina’s Loy’s “The Ineffectual Marriage,” or the kitchen boy in Langston Hughes’s “I Too, Sing America” allows for “our eyes” that “look out,” rather than in. Loy’s poem “Virgins Plus Curtains Minus Dots,” illustrates. Here Loy depicts women not as unpaid laborers confined to a separate workspace by the division of labor, but as a commodity that must first be purchased and then placed. Dots are marriage portions, or dowries, and so poor women are condemned to an eternal placelessness:

See the men pass
Their hats are not ours
We take a walk
They are going somewhere
And they may look everywhere
Men’s eyes look into things
Our eyes look out. (21)⁸

No matter the quality of vision, denying the lyric subject's relationship to the spatial and the temporal architecture of the poetically depicted world by positing a particular experience as normative undermines or denies the legitimacy of those whose experience of time depends very much on physical, spatial limitations – those who suffer from racial discrimination in which segregation is experienced as a spatial dislocation. For example, when Langston Hughes makes his speaker's ability to "sing" America contingent on the possibility of eating "in the kitchen" in the poem "I Too Sing America" (46) he is spatializing his experience of the world.

In the 1920s and 1930s no one knew if Langston Hughes's hope that the African American laborer could leave the kitchen of the nation and "sing America" in the dining room (or W.E.B. DuBois's striving to be a "co-worker in the Kingdom of Culture" [5]) was well founded or even possible. But the poem itself borrows from the spatial and temporal architecture of 1920s New York that was already imbued with pedagogical intent by civic-minded factory owners, engineers, landscape artists who were interested in assimilating immigrants and southern migrants. Each poem designs an inclusive model of the nation; one that would include the poet as a member. Indeed, Mark Morrisson points out that much of the discourse about modern American literature during the early part of the twentieth century was in the service of creating an American 'imagined community' as a living organism, one that might be expressed and even *grown* by a national literature" (13). The shape of this community, the voices that will be included in it, become the single most important question, then.

Notes

¹ I use the work "lyrical" here in the sense of the romantic and post-romantic lyric genre, which tends to place the speaker outside of the flow of time in space. See "Lyric Poetry," *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, ed. Alex Preminger and T.V.F. Brogan.

² Depictions of the King of Harlem and Harlemites as disguised and depictions of their unfamiliarity with the use of common manufactured objects abound in the poem "The King of Harlem." They are further clarified in a lecture García Lorca gave in Madrid in March 1932: "I wanted to write *the* poem of the black race in North America, and to show the pain the blacks feel to be black in a contrary world. They are slaves of all the white man's inventions and machines, perpetually afraid that someday they will forget how to light the gas stove or steer the automobile or fasten the starched collar, afraid of driving a fork through the eye. I mean that these inventions are not theirs. The blacks live on borrowed things..." Translation Simon & White (García Lorca, Simon & White 190).

³ Translations here and elsewhere are mine, unless noted otherwise.

⁴ Thanks to Kathryn Hellerstein, whose translations of Halpern I read before I wrote my own. See Kathryn Hellerstein, *In New York. A Selection*. Ed. & Trans. Kathryn Hellerstein (Philadelphia: Jewish Poetry Series, 1982).

⁵ All page numbers here refer to *The Collected Poems*.

⁶ See also Ernest Borneman, "The Roots of Jazz," p. 23–24 and Christopher Small, 461–70.

⁷ This poem first appeared under the title "Three Songs About Lynching," along with "Flight" and "Lynching Song" in the journal *Opportunity*, June, 1936, page 170. It was collected and

published in *A New Song*, New York: International Worker's Order, 1938, and again in *One Way Ticket*, New York: Knopf, 1949. This text is taken from *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*.

⁸ I would be misrepresenting Loy if I did not point out that several of her poems, such as "Songs to Joannes" (53–70) depict time as the dominant mode chronotope of modular time-space. They specifically gender time, and discuss space only in terms of the human body.

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