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## **“Their Song Filled the Whole Night”: Not Without Laughter, Hinterlands Jazz, and Rural Modernity**

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# **"THEIR SONG FILLED THE WHOLE NIGHT": NOT WITHOUT LAUGHTER, HINTERLANDS JAZZ, AND RURAL MODERNITY**

ANDY OLER

Near the end of Langston Hughes's 1930 novel *Not Without Laughter*, protagonist Sandy Rodgers leaves his rural hometown to join his mother in Chicago: "Stanton, Sandy's Kansas home, was back in the darkness, and the train sped towards the great center where all the small-town boys in the whole Middle West wanted to go" (Hughes 1995, 276). As Sandy travels east toward the Midwest's largest city, Hughes highlights one of the great tropes of rural life: its darkness, a lack of illumination that suffers in comparison to the desirable, idealized city. But after Sandy's excitement about moving, the novel flashes back to Sandy's visit with an elderly neighbor: "Sandy liked to listen to the rambling talk of old colored folks. 'I guess there won't be many like that in Chicago'" (277). Throughout the novel, Sandy's coming of age has been nurtured through the front-porch storytelling of his family and the rest of Stanton's African American community. As that experience ends, Sandy's anxieties range from tangible fears about Chicago and Stanton's geographic and generational differences to more intangible concerns about auditory and temporal variations. Chicago then fails to deliver centrality, modernity, and lightness. That failure troubles the city's status in the novel as a spatial and normative destination, refocusing attention on the novel's rural spaces and their accumulations: of pastoralized communalism and geographic mobility, of regressive darkness and sonic modernity.

This essay proposes "accumulation" as a trope of American modernity. Using rural jazz and blues music in addition to Hughes's novel, I demonstrate how literary and cultural texts accumulate narratives, materials, and sounds.

As a result, people and spaces—rural and urban alike—dwell in the coexistence of fragments and the ambivalence of their relations. In keeping with this accumulative modernity, many of Stanton's sounds are fleeting and the novel does not limit them to the stereotypically rural. While Hughes incorporates old folks' "rambling talk" (1995, 277), Sandy's grandmother "puff[ing] and blow[ing] over the wash-tubs" (212), and a ticket-taker refusing Sandy because "this party's for white kids" (197), the rural space also includes the modern sounds of the locomotive's "clatter" (72), men's banter at the pool hall and barbershop, and the performance of jazz and the blues. Furthermore, *Not Without Laughter* does not exclusively locate rural sounds in the country, but places them in the city as well.

Presenting Chicago as "the great center" similarly blurs boundaries, as it suggests how Hughes writes against the plantation-to-New York, south-to-north trajectory that he describes elsewhere as the "conventional" story of the Harlem Renaissance (quoted in "Writes" 1930, 20). That trajectory's perceived conventionality relates to the Great Migration that expanded and enriched the black populations of northern industrial cities, which can also be seen in Robert Bone's contention that "the crowded ghetto, unlike the isolated farm, provided a basis for a vigorous group life" (1965, 55). According to Bone, it was a "foregone conclusion" that Harlem would become the nation's African American cultural center (54). But this novel declines straightforward narratives of compulsory urbanity. Its Midwestern regionalism reworks Bone's assumption by implying that the performance, recording, and sales of early twentieth-century jazz music were inextricable from rural spaces. Indeed, registering how this novel undermines the spatial and narrative conventions of the Harlem Renaissance, one contemporary reviewer claims that *Not Without Laughter* "marches into a virgin field and establishes a new frontier for the branch of American letters known as Negro literature" (Lewis 1930, 9).<sup>2</sup>

This essay reads the rural Midwest as a modern space in which the sounds and material apparatus of early twentieth-century jazz music compose the cultural field of Hughes's novel. To extend the scholarship on music in *Not Without Laughter*, it shifts musical geographies and explores the novel's use of blues and jazz to generate specific forms of rural modernity.<sup>3</sup> I argue that *Not Without Laughter* does not attempt to supplant the more conventional urban modernities of Harlem and Chicago but rather constructs a rurally based alternative that generates ambivalence through accumulation, both filling and exceeding the novel's narrative spaces and the experiences of its characters. The essay's first section demonstrates how Hughes undercuts notions of an exclusively urban modernity by evoking rural spaces through Chicago street sounds. Next, I develop this combination of the material and the ephemeral but turn to Stanton as a space of modern music and social behaviors that signify rurality, urbanity, the Midwest, and other regions. Approaching Hughes's novel through the sonic ambivalences of modern rurality, then, not only evidences how some authors transgressed the supposed boundaries of the Harlem Renaissance by locating their texts outside conventional narratives.<sup>4</sup> It also demonstrates how modernist

turns to the rural space don't stop at exploring folk narratives and forms, and instead proposes the existence of rural and regional modernities that accumulate materials, stories, and sounds.

### GREAT CENTER, DUSTY STREETS

Sandy expects Chicago to fulfill its popular image as “the great center,” a city of light amidst the “darkness” of Stanton and the small-town Midwest—in short, he expects Chicago to realize the promise of urban futurity, an enduring conception that evokes the city’s association with the 1893 Columbian Exposition.<sup>5</sup> Predictably, his experience of the city falls short of that utopian image: “He hadn’t expected the great city to be monotonous and ugly like this and he was vaguely disappointed. No towers, no dreams come true! Where were the thrilling visions of grandeur he had held? Hidden in dusty streets? Hidden in the long, hot alleys through which he could see at a distance the tracks of the elevated trains?” (Hughes 1995, 278–79). While Sandy has been told that Chicago is “a wicked city” (276), he is unprepared for its lack of material beauty. Where he expects skyscrapers and dreams, he finds dust; where he expects centrality, he finds periphery.<sup>6</sup>

Sandy’s disappointment in “the great city” gestures toward the ambivalent relationship between Chicago and rural communities throughout the Midwest. In a commonly represented hierarchy, Sandy assumes that Chicago will be a place where “dreams come true”; and historians similarly describe a system of urban superiority. For example, even when detailing the mutual interests of Chicago and the rural Midwest, William Cronon writes of “a White City and *its* thriving countryside” (1991, 369; emphasis added). The possessive pronoun at once indicates urban ownership of the countryside, but this sentence also emphasizes how the countryside is “thriving,” which insinuates a more complex relationship. For Cronon, that ambivalence arises from familiar conceptions about the country and the city: “At the two extremes of the urban axis were the White City and the Dark: the city as pinnacle of civilization versus the city as abyss of moral despair. At opposite poles of the rural axis were similar images: the country as pastoral utopia versus the country as stultifying backwater” (364). Such perspectives on the Midwest highlight the conflicts that arise from processes of rural modernization, which can be seen in *Not Without Laughter* as Stanton’s black citizens try to retain a sense of community as well as provide young people the opportunity to travel and improve their socioeconomic standing. Therefore, while Sandy, his aunt Harriett, and others are exposed to the city as a space of possibility, they are also told, “I can only hope Chicago won’t ruin you” (276).

Aesthetically and geographically, Sandy’s arrival in Chicago evokes Alan Trachtenberg’s theory of incorporation, which frames US culture and economics during this period in terms of increasing centralization and dependency. Using the example of Chicago after the 1871 fire that destroyed almost three square miles of the city’s downtown area, Trachtenberg notes that wealth disparities

increased as the city rebuilt itself according to “divisive ‘sector-and-ring’ patterns . . . that segregated spaces by function (commercial, industrial, and political downtown; surrounding and outlying residential neighborhoods) and by class and income” (2007, 117). Trachtenberg incorporates the uneven development of urban spaces into his larger narrative of industrial growth, which describes the urban migration of rural populations as part of the increasing size and wealth of American cities. *Not Without Laughter* seems to exemplify this narrative, as Sandy travels from country to city and experiences its peripheral, impoverished spaces. In this reading, despite Chicago’s evident failings, Sandy’s relocation there fulfills its images of centrality and desirability, and his distant view of the city’s iconic transportation system reinforces both the city’s modernity and the wealth disparities created by its land-use patterns.

Despite its affinities with key features of this model of incorporation, *Not Without Laughter* does not simply report on the increasing importance of the urban space. Nor does it detail the inherent contradictions of ruralized subject positions when they are moved to the city. Rather, in the novel’s three Chicago-based chapters (of a total of thirty), Hughes thinks through how Sandy and other rural characters can negotiate their experiences of the city without either relinquishing the identities they developed in Stanton or denying themselves the possibilities afforded by urbanity. By imagining an urban space that balances Sandy’s “thrilling visions of grandeur” with the “dusty streets” that also could have been found in Stanton (278), Hughes creates a narrative that runs against the patterns of incorporation. He avoids incorporating rural people and economics into urban teleologies, instead generating equally modern rural and urban spaces in which each includes elements of the other. Furthermore, these representational accumulations muddy Chicago’s status as the novel’s urban endpoint.

Whether in country or city, Hughes uses sound to create a balanced modernity for both Sandy and the novel. This approach can be seen in his representation of Harriett’s blues performance in Chicago and, as I will discuss in the next section, a traveling jazz band in Stanton. In the novel’s closing scene, Hughes focuses on street sounds. As Sandy and Annjee return from dinner after Harriett’s concert, they hear a church choir: “vibrant and steady like a stream of living faith, their song filled the whole night” (Hughes 1995, 299). On Chicago’s South Side, voice merges with space, “as the deep volume of sound roll[s] through the open door” (299) and then fills the urban streets. Regarding this scene, critics have noted Harriett’s exhortations for Sandy to fulfill Hager’s wishes for him “to help the black race” (298), as well as on her material support of his education. Notably, Hager’s wishes and Harriett’s money come from religion and the blues, and Steven Tracy notes how “the oral blues tradition supports the gaining of literacy, especially in one like Sandy, who seems able to accept the power and beauty of the blues side by side with an appreciation of the spirituals” (2007, 28).

Hughes’s use of Sandy to join these two historically important sound-making traditions in African American communities also highlights the ways that they cross regional boundaries and wield significant influence in both rural and

urban settings. Indeed, in the final moments of this book, they determine his experience of the Chicago streets. Because the choir's "song filled the whole night" (Hughes 1995, 299), Sandy is reminded of spaces outside his immediate urban surroundings. That filling-in of space does not stop with State Street but also reaches his rural hometown: to Sandy, the choir's singing feels "like Stanton . . . and the tent in the Hickory Woods" (299). By representing the rural as part of Sandy's urban environs, then, Hughes merges two distinct Midwestern spaces into a single experience. The sound of the choir's song recalls Sandy's past and projects his Harriett-supported future. It also brings rurality into a bustling urban space but avoids privileging either element, which underscores this scene's other mediations. For instance, Sandy hears the choir in the aftermath of a cabaret show, a gambling lesson, and a family argument about the merits of education and labor that is held in a Chinese restaurant. Sandy's willingness to absorb each of these elements, and to negotiate their influence on him, proposes a kind of accumulative modernity that Hughes applies to this scene and across the Midwestern regional space.

While *Not Without Laughter* explores Midwestern modernity, Chicago is not exclusively a heartland space. For example, the novel internationalizes regional boosterism through the reputation of State Street as "the greatest Negro street in the world" (Hughes 1995, 284). And it gestures at the city's participation in global systems of cultural and economic circulation when Sandy, Harriett, and Annjee go to a "Chinese café" to get "chop suey instead of going to a regular restaurant" (295). Hughes accesses both national and international elements using the *Chicago Defender*, a nationally distributed African American newspaper from which Annjee reads reports of "colored troops" fighting in France (286), and Harriett invokes national race issues by expressing a desire for Sandy to "get ahead . . . in this white man's country" (298).<sup>7</sup> In the final scene, Hughes specifically notes Chicago's connections to other US regional spaces when the gospel choir meets "in a little Southern church on a side street" (298).

Even though the novel's main narrative moves exclusively within the Midwest and the Southern church evokes Sandy's Kansas hometown, the text acknowledges the pervasive influence of Southern regional culture on the experience of Midwestern African Americans. Hager's slavery (Hughes 1995, 82) and the origins of the musicians in a traveling jazz band (105) figure Southern influence historically. Other episodes mark material history in its accumulation within affective experience, such as a neighbor's terror-filled story of Mississippi whites attacking a black neighborhood for "gittin' so prosperous" (85) or Sandy's anger at a drunken white Southerner who commands him, "Boy! I want to see you dance!" (215). In each of these incidents, an act of Southern racial violence incites an emotional response. The narrative retains that rural emotionalism within the urban space of Chicago but shifts the focus away from violence when Annjee draws hope from the choir: "Them old folks are still singing—even in Chicago!" (299).

Living in “the Black Belt” (Hughes 1995, 279) of Chicago’s South Side, Annjee and Sandy experience the city in terms of what historian James Grossman describes as the outsized cultural influence of Southern migrants: “The aromas of southern cooking, especially from the ubiquitous barbecue stands during the summer; the sounds of New Orleans jazz and Mississippi blues; styles of worship; patterns of speech: these were but the most obvious manifestations of the extent to which black southerners reshaped both their cultural heritage and their new environment” (1989, 262). According to Grossman, the Chicago experience cannot be exclusively urban because of the influence of migrants on everyday sights, sounds, and smells, and their continuing association with nonurban space. Hughes extends this referentiality using Annjee’s nostalgia and the memory of Sandy’s anger, demonstrating how *Not Without Laughter* accumulates sense experience and gestures to spaces and histories outside of its metropolitan present.

Hughes forms Sandy’s modern experience in Chicago not only by highlighting the ephemeral and the momentary but also by emphasizing its simultaneity: both rural and urban, both Midwestern and Southern. The breadth of those influences develops into a version of Chicago in which urban black communities are marked by the ubiquity and intensity of sensory experience. When the narrator describes the choir, then, it is in terms of the strength of their communal voice: “High and fervently they were singing” (298), as they both fill the streets and allude to spaces and experiences outside of the metropolis. That method of exceeding the moment, however, also extends to the novel’s rural experiences. Functioning as the converse of the rural choir’s effect on the Chicago streets, jazz and blues music move within and signify the modernity of the novel’s rural spaces. They also enable Sandy to get his education, a combination highlighting the accumulative modernity that Hughes creates for (and in the forms of) Chicago, Stanton, and his protagonist.

## REMAPPING RURAL MODERNITIES

As suggested by one contemporary reviewer, who writes that “once it gains its momentum it moves as swiftly as a jazz rhythm” (*Not Without Laughter and Other* 1930, 56), *Not Without Laughter* signals its modernity by representing, associating with, and spatializing specific sounds, techniques that are deployed both in figuring Chicago and the novel’s rural spaces. When a traveling jazz band performs in a Stanton dancehall, Harriett and her boyfriend Mingo sneak out to attend the dance against Hager’s wishes. They take Sandy with them because Harriett can’t leave him alone and, as Mingo says, “better the kid than no dance” (Hughes 1995, 94). As with Sandy’s experience of the choir in the Chicago streets, the novel marks the music in this scene by its spatial effect: “Like a blare from hell the second encore of *Easy Rider* filled every cubic inch of the little hall with hip-rocking notes” (95). While this is a jazz-and-blues band rather than a church choir, the way that the music both fills this particular space and alludes to other

spaces suggests how Hughes uses sensory experience. Like so many of the other influences on Sandy, these sounds are both fleeting and formidable, and their placement in rural as well as urban spaces suggests how Hughes writes against common narratives of urban modernity. Seen in this light, Sandy does not realize a modern subject position when he moves to Chicago, but carries it with him from the rural space.

Hughes demonstrates the rural dancehall's modernity partly by representing the Stanton community's creation of and response to the music's sounds and rhythms. At the dance, this can be seen when

suddenly and without warning the cornet blared at the other end of the hall in an ear-splitting wail: 'Whaw! . . . Whaw! . . . Whaw! . . . Whaw!' and the snare-drum rolled in answer. . . . 'Ever'body shake!' cried Benbow, as a ribbon of laughter swirled round the hall. (Hughes 1995, 99)

By linking the instruments' jarring sounds, the bandleader's cries, and the audience's response, Hughes creates a sonic composite of the dancehall's modernity. Hughes's incorporation of jazz and blues rhythms has been much discussed by scholars of his poetry, so the cornet's wail and the banjo's "plinka, plink, plink" (99) read as a familiar method of representing African American spaces and cultural forms.<sup>8</sup> This scene takes on its particularly modern form as the instruments chime in and the dancers' identities become fluid: "Couples began to sway languidly, melting together like candy in the sun as hips rotated effortlessly to the music" (99). Thus, as the music fills the space and Hughes incorporates the sounds of the instruments, the dancers' forms change, which highlights the fluidity of individual and communal. It may be expected that urban incorporations of the ruralized individual would generate certain kinds of mutability. But this passage suggests that the novel's rural spaces allow characters a fluid identity as well as the modern spaces and experiences in which they can take advantage of it.

The effect of sound on the dancehall and on the dancers themselves suggests Hughes's attempt to create for Sandy a flexible modernity that accumulates many contextually based influences. Josh Kun addresses this idea in terms of the famous story of Hughes writing his early poem "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" while riding a train across the United States to join his father in Mexico: "a train ride that took Hughes not into one nation or another, but into a transnational land of the middle—where cultures and identities have historically existed in a state of contestation, conflict, and hybridity" (2005, 153). While Kun focuses on Hughes's transnationalism, his interest in mobility and border-crossing suggests how *Not Without Laughter's* Midwestern regionalism negotiates the conflicted middle ground of US modernity. For Kun, Hughes's use of music and its effect on space is antithetical to "space as a fixed, static, unchanged landscape. The spaces of music may produce maps, but they are maps that move" (2005, 21-22). In the dancehall, sound fills the space, mapping and remapping as "the piano lazie[s] into a slow drag" or "the drums [keep] up their hard steady laughter" (Hughes 1995, 99-100) and as dancers alternate between being individuals, couples, and the

disembodied “shuf-shuf-shuffle of feet” (106).<sup>9</sup> This kind of remapping appears to be at odds with Andrew Berish’s argument that music “creates places that are stable and familiar” (2012, 23). Indeed, Benbow’s band makes the dancehall space profoundly unfamiliar to Sandy through its “ear-splitting” volume, shifting rhythms, and Sandy’s fluid perception of the dancers. But this novel also suggests how to synthesize Berish’s and Kun’s claims: even though the dancehall’s sonic landscape is unstable, Hughes presents the community of dancers and their collective response to the music as comforting to Sandy. This seeming opposition allows Hughes to negotiate the accumulative dynamics of rural modernity.

While the sounds and dancers remap the dancehall space, a separate incidence of mapping in this scene occurs through the song titles and variety of blues stylings. When the band switches songs, they play “this time just blues, not the *St. Louis*, nor the *Memphis*, nor the *Yellow Dog*—but just the plain old familiar blues, heart-breaking and extravagant, ma-baby’s-gone-from-me blues” (Hughes 1995, 103). Thus, before the band begins to play “just blues,” the narrative accumulates geographical resonances through the invocation of “Memphis” and “St. Louis” blues. By adopting place names and concurrently implying that those sounds somehow define Memphis or St. Louis, the novel gestures to the practice of place-naming within the “race record” market.<sup>10</sup> Throughout the explosion of music marketed to African American consumers in the 1920s, record labels advertised and sold records remarkably similar to those in *Not Without Laughter*. For example, a 1923 Paramount Records advertisement features several songs and groups named after places, including a record by “Handy’s Memphis Blues Band” with the songs “St. Louis Blues” and “Yellow Dog Blues” (“Ida” 1923, A10).<sup>11</sup> In a similar 1923 Gennett Records advertisement (see fig. 1), two songs are explicitly named after Kansas City, a third evokes the South more generally, and one of the advertised groups is named for a Southern city.

Thus, even as the novel signals how it will distance itself from known blues geographies, *Not Without Laughter* evokes the actual artists, songs, and places of 1920s race records. Beyond these naming parallels, the two advertisements cited here were published in the *Chicago Defender*, a key player in the distribution of blues and jazz music which the novel explicitly mentions in episodes in Chicago and among several different parts of Stanton’s African American community. Within the novel and outside, the *Defender*’s widespread availability draws attention to



Figure 1. Advertisement for Gennett Records, *Chicago Defender*, October 20, 1923, 7. Courtesy of the *Chicago Defender*.

the possible uses and limits of geographically evocative music. Such songs as Benbow's "Memphis" and "St. Louis" blues might be considered nostalgic, part of a country blues tradition, or targeted at shifting African American populations. But the narrator's description of musical styles suggests that *Not Without Laughter* may treat specific geographies as necessarily parochial and perhaps not "familiar" to those outside the boundaries defined in the song.

One reason for skepticism towards a stable, geographically based blues is that Hughes repeatedly remaps this music, not only with song titles but also through the band members' origins and affiliations. For example, the band asserts their Midwestern urbanity with the "big bass-drum, on which was painted in large red letters: 'BENBOW'S FAMOUS KANSAS CITY BAND'" (Hughes 1995, 102). But the band members' geographical origins complicate that assertion when the narrator describes them as "four men and a leader—Rattle Benbow from Galveston; Benbow's buddy, the drummer, from Houston; his banjoist from Birmingham; his cornetist from Atlanta; and the pianist, long-fingered, sissified, a coal-black lad from New Orleans who had brought with him an exaggerated rag-time which he called jazz" (105). Adding to the earlier list of blues styles, the novel's first mention of "jazz" forms the end of a series of phrases referring to this scene's other accumulations. These include the way that the urbanized, "sissified" pianist alludes to other kinds of homosocial masculinity, suggested by the mention of "Benbow's buddy" and the performative sexual boasting in the boys' washroom (98). Through the blues tradition of introducing the sidemen, this passage gestures to the concert space and simultaneously reaches beyond it by revealing that Benbow and his band come from cities but not the Midwestern one they use as a label. Rather, they hail from all over the southern United States, remapping their geographical affiliations in the moment of the concert.

That the band members come primarily from urban spaces suggests certain limits to *Not Without Laughter's* otherwise inclusive presentation of geographical affiliation. But the novel's engagement with the race-record market muddies that sense of limitation by suggesting how Benbow's band and jazz performance also evoke rural spaces. Two of the major players in race records, Gennett and Paramount, were based in small towns because they were offshoots of other companies (Starr Piano and Wisconsin Chair, respectively) that depended upon rural materials and shipping lines. Their locations, recording technologies, and Gennett's claim to "the first interracial recording session in jazz history" associate racial, mechanical, and social modernity with rural spaces.<sup>12</sup> These connections were not always advertised: Paramount's ad locates that company in rural Port Washington, Wisconsin, but the Gennett ad (fig. 1) doesn't mention its main recording studio in small-town Richmond, Indiana.

The novel signals an awareness of rural affiliation nonetheless, most obviously in the location of the dance but also when it notes the touring circuit for African American performers, such as when Harriett gets "some dates booked over the Orpheum circuit" (Hughes 1995, 296): the Orpheum circuit consisted of a coordinated booking and theater system in large and small cities across the US

(see Wertheim 2006, Erdman 2004). Sandy learns of Harriett's fame from the *Defender*, soon after reading "a few of the items there concerning colored shows" (253). The narrative refers here to a type of column describing the travel of black performing artists throughout the country, which implies the prominence of rurality within jazz and blues performance circuits. A representative column from a 1925 issue of the *Defender* mentions famous performers alongside many lesser-known artists, including dancers, blues singers, comedians, and minstrel shows. The column tracks performers through theaters in major cities and along the road through several small towns (including multiple locations in Kansas), and describes one duo that was "doing the week between Argentine, Kan., and Weston, Mo" ("A Note" 1925, 7). Black musical performance draws these spaces together into a networked rural modernity including not only the dancehalls but also recording and advertising practices. For example, the column clarifies an earlier, erroneous report that a Gennett cornetist had signed with Paramount. Starting with Sandy browsing the newspaper, then, *Not Without Laughter's* version of modern life accumulates details of African American touring and performance—along with intimations of the associated networks of publishing, distribution, and readership—as it generically mirrors its representation of sound as both filling and exceeding the novel's spaces.

Through the *Defender* and the dance, *Not Without Laughter* gestures to the entire field of African American musical production, including such rural companies as Gennett and Paramount. To explore how this novel exceeds the confines of its own pages by accumulating references to the systems and spaces of musical production and performance, I turn here to Gennett's recording studio, a key location within those systems. Built in the Whitewater River Gorge in Richmond, Indiana, the Starr Piano factory and Gennett studio are separated topographically from the town around them.<sup>13</sup> Rick Kennedy's history of the label emphasizes this literal separation through Gennett's geographic distance from major cities: "With the Richmond studio situated in the hinterlands, its business depended on signing bands passing through town" (1994, 30). Kennedy places Richmond in the "hinterlands," echoing *Not Without Laughter* as well as Cronon's and Spears's histories of Chicago. Each of these texts implies that Chicago is—to borrow language from Hughes's novel—"the great center" of a vast periphery, set apart from "the darkness [of] the whole Middle West" (Hughes 1995, 276). This language implies an affective distance also present in images of the Starr-Gennett complex. As seen in postcards and photographs from the period, the Gennett studio was hidden below Richmond rather than towering above it. In some images, the river and its wild banks add to that sense of distance. Other images, however, foreground the factory smokestack or the railroad, highlighting Starr-Gennett's industrial production. Kennedy's turn to the language of mobility similarly complicates Gennett's seeming isolation. The acts he describes as "passing through town" recall not only the *Chicago Defender's* travel columns but also, more explicitly, the blues-singing "adventurers and vagabonds" of *Not Without Laughter* who "passed through Stanton on the main line" (1994, 248).

Stories about the Gennett studio explicitly connect it to the railroad, as the tracks ran right through the Starr-Gennett complex (see fig. 2). Allegedly, “the trains could generate enough commotion to interrupt recording sessions” (Kennedy 1994, 28), a legend that complicates the studio’s general ruralization by asserting its proximity to an icon of mechanical modernity. The photograph



Figure 2. Photograph of the Starr-Gennett complex, circa 1920s. Courtesy of the John K. Mackenzie Collection, Indiana Historical Society, Mo428.

reproduced here foregrounds multiple sets of railroad tracks, which both dominate the frame and draw the eye outside it. The tracks, factory buildings, and the truck used for onsite field recording are thereby drawn into a relationship emphasizing the different sounds and mobilities of modern rurality. Furthermore, the proximity of the unseen river to these buildings and railroad tracks recalls a scene from *Not Without Laughter* in which Sandy and his father Jimboy are fishing on the river when “the train [comes] by behind them, pouring out a great cloud of smoke and cinders and shaking the jetty, . . . sending back a hollow clatter as it shot past the flour-mills” (Hughes 1995, 72). The river functions here as a liminal space between the railroad’s raucous industrial modernity and the stillness of the “gold of wheat-fields” on the opposite bank (73). Similarly, Gennett’s “hinterlands” location and its relationship to touring artists suggest an ambivalence in the modern rural space that echoes the photo’s interactions between the placed buildings and the tracks’ implication of movement.

The sonic ambivalences of modern rurality inflect the dance in *Not Without Laughter*, and thereby lend it a spatial or territorial dimension that can be

understood through the juxtaposition of railroad and riverbank in the novel and in the topography of the Starr-Gennett complex captured in figure 2. As Benbow's band play the "plain old familiar blues" (103), they not only inspire alienation and connection among the dancers, but do so in the context of the dancehall's rural location:

Bodies sweatily close, arms locked, cheek to cheek, breast to breast, couples rocked to the pulse-like beat of the rhythm, yet quite oblivious each person of the other. It was true that men and women were dancing together, but their feet had gone down through the floor into the earth, each dancer's alone—down into the center of things—and their minds had gone off to the heart of loneliness, where they didn't even hear the words, the sometimes lying, sometimes laughing words that Benbow, leaning over the piano, was singing against this background of utterly despondent music. (Hughes 1995, 103–104)

As the passage begins, dancers respond to the music, locking their bodies tightly together, each couple joined as one. But then the passage turns to their loneliness and, while the rhythms join two people's sweaty body parts, that same music's despondence creates a space to which they go alone. The music sends the dancers into themselves and outside the space of the dance into "the earth." This scene extends the feeling of modern alienation into rural space: despite the bodily proximity and modern music, which could both be taken as exclusively urban, the narrative describes the dancers' affective isolation in terms of the earth, a connection to the local space that Hughes writes terrestrially. Thus, in this "little dance-hall in a Kansas town on Friday night" (105), the experience of sound creates an uneasy balance between communalism and isolation, an uneasy balance that produces the modernity of this rural space.

Whether in the Chicago streets or the Stanton dancehall, sound similarly fills and exceeds its space. But in some ways, such as in the representation of black bodies, the dancehall's modernity exceeds even that of Chicago. When Sandy and Annjee attend Harriett's concert in Chicago, they find "a typical Black Belt audience, laughing uproariously, stamping its feet to the music, kidding the actors, and joining in the performance, too. Rows of shiny black faces, gay white teeth, bobbing heads" (Hughes 1995, 291). In Stanton, Hughes avoids the fixed stereotypicality of Chicago's "rows of shiny black faces." Instead, as Sandy sleepily watches the dancers, Hughes marks the rural dancehall with a broad range of colors and movements: "Dresses and suits of all shades and colors, and a vast confusion of bushy heads on swaying bodies. Faces gleaming like circus balloons—lemon-yellow, coal-black, powder-grey, ebony-black, blue-black faces; chocolate, brown, orange, tan, creamy-gold faces—the room full of floating balloon faces—Sandy's eyes were beginning to blur with sleep" (102). The diverse crowd fills the hall and interacts fluidly. In Stanton, the dancers are bound neither by the structured audience-performer relationship of the Chicago theater nor by expectations of a typified homogeneity.

While at one level this representational disparity relates to the different protocols of the theater and the dancehall, I contend that it also testifies to the

way in which Hughes's rural space offers the possibility of modern plurality. The "vast confusion" of bodies and behaviors in the dancehall provides a counternarrative to the homogeneity implied in the "typical Black Belt audience" and, more broadly, the incorporated centralization demanded by life in Chicago. There are echoes here of Houston Baker positioning the blues at a crossroads that he defines as "polymorphous and multidirectional, scene of arrivals and departures, place betwixt and between" (1984, 7). Whether as sounds and stories or "arrivals and departures," this novel's accumulations generate ambivalence through diversity. George Hutchinson identifies that diversity as a key part of early twentieth-century African American literary culture when he claims that the foundational 1925 anthology, *The New Negro*, "does not hold out a single gauge of black 'authenticity'; in fact, it implicitly opposes any such gesture. It is not overwhelmingly pastoral in orientation. It does not attack, suppress, or even ignore the cultural hybridity of African America—quite the opposite" (1995, 432). *Not Without Laughter* similarly opposes a notion of singular authenticity. But it does so at a more localized level, allowing a pastoral rurality to exist alongside poverty, personal and institutional racism, and the sonic modernity of blues and jazz music. And while the novel presents the difficulty of balancing divergences within these accumulations, it also gestures toward the promise of a rural modernity that can absorb them. A consideration of the ways in which Hughes reframes sonic modernity here in order to account for its rural characteristics revises the spatial assumptions of African American and modernist literary studies and allows us to begin rethinking the regional, material, and cultural networks of American modernity.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Regarding Harlem Renaissance conventions, see Marlon Ross's discussion of masculine coming-of-age narratives, in which he notes that texts by Hughes, Johnson, Henderson, and Bontemps chart a trajectory from naïve "rural boyishness" to "urban manhood, with its unsettling compensations" (2004, 330). For histories of the Great Migration that address economics and Midwestern cities, see Drake and Cayton (1993), Grossman (1989), Teaford (1993), and Litwack (1998).
- <sup>2</sup> Many contemporary reviews specifically note that *Not Without Laughter* is not a conventional Harlem novel. Reviewers suggest that this unconventionality is due to its "Middle Western setting, which though more unusual in a novel of Negro life, lacks its accustomed picturesqueness" (C. M. Green 1997, 144). A related thread in reviews of the novel concerns its lack of "flippant exhibitionism" (Locke 1997). For further reviews using similar language, see "Education, Black and White" (1997), Paterson (1997), Carmon (1997), and E. L. Green (1997).
- <sup>3</sup> Several scholars have studied the use of music within *Not Without Laughter*, often relating the novel's blues to Harlem Renaissance-era interest in the folk. This study agrees that Hughes's novel contextualizes the blues among other folk forms and also attempts to transcend them, as can be seen in Tracy (1988) and Kent (1989). Chasar suggests how the novel avoids simplistic representations of the folk by the way that, through the blues, Sandy's father Jimboy "reclaim[s] a space in a local soundscape" (2008, 75). I develop

- this idea by showing how *Not Without Laughter* shifts the locality of that soundscape to a small Kansas town and presents “the folk” as not simply a Southern phenomenon. This article is thereby in conversation with other scholarship examining the novel’s nonstereotypical representations of the blues. Wall, for instance, claims that Harriett is the first blueswoman represented in literature and, while lacking social and religious support, she must balance “moral and spiritual power” with the “aspirations . . . of the masses” (1995, 46). Building on Wall’s sense of how characters actively negotiate those accumulated meanings, this essay counters another critical narrative, that blues in *Not Without Laughter* encourages complacency, seen in Rosenblatt (1989) and Shields (1994).
- <sup>4</sup> Hughes’s Midwestern revision of the Great Migration narrative relates to the Harlem Renaissance’s international boundary transgressions; see Kun (2005) and Bell (1987).
  - <sup>5</sup> Regarding the effect of the 1893 World’s Fair on popular conceptions of Chicago, see Cronon (1991) and Spears (2005).
  - <sup>6</sup> While rural migration to the city is often described in terms of stark difference (see Kirschner 1970), this essay builds on Spears’s claim that, “for some migrants, the difference between city and country was slight, and . . . the movement from one to the other represented a natural, matter-of-fact extension of interests that were first developed in the hinterland” (2005, xvi).
  - <sup>7</sup> Grossman’s map, “*Chicago Defender* Shipping List,” illustrates the newspaper’s circulation throughout the US South, noting correspondences between the number of copies received and African Americans’ percentage of the total population (1989, 76–77).
  - <sup>8</sup> See Baker (1984), Kun (2005), and Lowney (2012) on music as a formal and historical device in Hughes’s poetry.
  - <sup>9</sup> Regarding the dancehall as a performance space, see Vogel on Harlem cabaret culture, especially the emphasis on the “collaboration between spectators and performers” (2009, 22).
  - <sup>10</sup> For histories of race records and the development of markets geared to African American consumers, see Miller (2010), Kennedy (1994), Kennedy and McNutt (1999), and Calt (2002).
  - <sup>11</sup> According to Brooks and Spottswood (2004), Handy was among the first published blues artists, recording as early as 1912. His most famous songs—the “Memphis,” “Yellow Dog,” and “St. Louis” blues—directly echo *Not Without Laughter*. Furthermore, Sandy’s grandmother Hager evokes folk legend through Handy’s song, “Aunt Hagar’s Children Blues,” which is based on “the biblical story of Abraham, Sarah, and Sarah’s black handmaiden Hagar, from which blacks sometimes referred to themselves as Hagar’s children” (2004, 426).
  - <sup>12</sup> In comparison to jazz recording, blues has a rich rural history. For example, Oliver (2009) discusses early field recording and rural “proto-blues”; Brooks and Spottswood (2004) archive early jazz and blues artists who came from, toured through, and recorded in rural areas; and McNutt (2002) extends this conversation into the mid-twentieth century when he notes the ruralized locations of several “regional music centers” across the country. Turning from the field of jazz and blues recording to specific individual labels results in spotty and confusing partial histories, of which Gennett and Paramount are representative. Along with several lost documents, this confusion stems from widespread use of pseudonymous recordings for reasons both social and commercial, multiple recording locations (Gennett had a studio in New York City as well as the main Starr-Gennett complex in Richmond), and the practice of contracting pressings with other labels (such as the blues records that Paramount contracted with Gennett in

1929). See Kennedy (1994), Kennedy and McNutt (1999), and the draft manuscripts for John K. Mackenzie's unpublished history of Gennett in the Indiana Historical Society's Mackenzie Collection (n.d., Box 4).

- <sup>13</sup> Early photographs of the Starr Piano Factory, such as *Starr Piano Factory, View from the North* (n.d., Gennett Records Collection) show the factory and stacks of wood for constructing pianos located in a fairly desolate river gorge, while the later *Starr Piano Factory, Aerial View from the South* (n.d., Gennett Records Collection) shows not only the growing factory complex and town around it, but also highlights heavy growth on the river banks right next to the factory. Postcards from the era—usually color-enhanced photographs—feature plentiful green space. *River View, South—Starr Piano Factory in Distance, Richmond, Ind* (n.d., Gennett Records Collection) presents a wild-looking river and banks, while *Starr Piano Co., Richmond, Indiana, 1909* (“Hoosier Recollections” 2010) highlights the river. *Starr Piano Co., Richmond, Indiana, 1910* (“Hoosier Recollections” 2010) isolates the factory within green hills. Almost every time the smokestack is present, whether in postcards or photographs, the ample visible smoke designates the factory's robust activity.

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