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Black, White, and Blues: Race and the Modernist Avant-Garde in *Blues: A Magazine of New Rhythms*❖

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ABSTRACT

The modernist magazine *Blues: A Magazine of New Rhythms* was founded and edited by Charles Henri Ford and was published over the course of ten issues from 1929 to 1930. Although the title seems to suggest that the journal would focus on or be inspired by the musical genre of the blues, jazz, or perhaps even more broadly on black culture, only three contributions in the entire run mention black music or culture at all. This article analyzes those three poems by Ford, assistant editor Kathleen Tankersley Young, and Witter Bynner to demonstrate the way queer white avant-garde writers of modernist literature simultaneously recognized the vitality of black culture and the problem of racial inequality and violence while also appropriating the sense of marginalization of black Americans. While these queer authors share sense of marginalization with black people—a theme of each of these poems—they also reduce black life and culture to mere shorthand to show a white writer is a progressive-minded rule breaker. In this way, I argue that *Blues* exemplifies the use of black culture in avant-garde modernism to assert a kind of cultural capital while, in effect, appropriating black culture.

KEYWORDS: modernism, racial appropriation, black culture, little magazines, poetry, queer writers

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黑人、白人與藍調：《藍調：新節奏雜誌》中的族裔與現代主義前衛※

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摘　要

現代主義雜誌：《藍調:新節奏雜誌》(Blues: A Magazine of New Rhythms)由查爾斯・亨利・福特(Charles Henri Ford)創辦及主編，並在1929年至1930年間共出版了十期。儘管雜誌的標題似乎暗示著其內容將聚焦在或是受到藍調、爵士樂、或是更廣泛的黑人文化等音樂類型的啟發，但最終在整個刊物中，僅僅只有三篇文章提到了黑人音樂或文化。本文分析了福特、助理編輯凱斯琳・譚克斯莉・楊(Kathleen Tankersley Young)，以及維特・拜納(Witter Bynner)的三首詩，旨在揭示現代主義文學中，酷兒白人前衛作家如何一方面承認黑人文化的活力，與種族不平等及暴力問題的同時，另一方面卻又將非裔美國人的邊緣化經驗挪為己用。雖然這些酷兒白人作家在詩中所呈現的核心主題，與黑人處於邊緣化的經驗相似，不過他們不著墨黑人的生活經歷與文化，僅僅草率帶過，以呈現白人作家先進的思想突破。因此，我主張《藍調》體現了黑人文化在前衛的現代主義中的運用，並彰顯出一種文化資本，但事實上涉及了黑人文化的挪用。

關鍵詞：現代主義、種族挪用、黑人文化、小雜誌、詩歌、酷兒作家

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Picking up an issue of *Blues: A Magazine of New Rhythms*, published over the course of ten issues from 1929 to 1930, potential readers might naturally assume that the journal would include writing about or inspired by the musical genre of the blues or its related form jazz. Readers might also imagine *Blues* focuses more broadly on black culture as the root of the musical form. But when readers perused the pages, they would find that none of this was the case. In fact, *Blues*, founded and edited by Charles Henri Ford with assistance from his associate editor Kathleen Tankersley Young, was a literary journal that was completely unrelated to music and entirely unconnected to black culture. In the entire run of the magazine, only two contributions reference blues or jazz music, and only one other poem relates to issues of black life at all. Furthermore, Ford and Tankersley Young—and the later assistant editor Parker Tyler—were all white, and the contributors to the magazine were—so far as can be definitively determined almost a century later—also all white. Thus, *Blues* was in fact a collection of poetry and prose by white writers.

Indeed, Ford's choice of title was not without criticism, even from his closest collaborators. In a letter from 1928, Tankersley Young wrote: "I think the name is pretty bad and so does everyone I've told about it. It leads one to think of a special Negro Rhythm . . . Why not call it BLUE . . . or something like MODERNS . . . or think of something" (qtd. in White 188). Yet Ford persisted in using the title despite his friend's suggestion. In another letter from around 1928, Tankersley Young criticized the title of the magazine again, writing: "no one can figure out the BLUES . . . they all say that that is a specialized word, new perhaps but with a limited meaning" (Letter). She then suggests titles such as "Moderns" or "The Modernist" (Letter). The fact that Tankersley Young mentions this in a second letter suggests that she received no response to the first, even though both letters survive in Ford's archives. Neither is there an extant response to her second letter. Further, Ford never explained his choice within the pages of the magazine or in any known archival material from the period.

The title of the magazine is, at the very least, confusing (or confused) in its relationship to music and to race, but the title is not the only instance of confusion in the magazine's longer history. Contemporary scholarship on the journal and its editorial staff demonstrates another misconception related to race, this time concerning Tankersley Young. Little known today, she had a successful career writing and editing in the late '20s and early '30s. As Eric

White notes: "Almost forgotten by literary history, Kathleen Tankersley Young's name appears like a cipher through little magazines of the late 1920s and early 1930s, and in anthologies of Harlem Renaissance and American women's poetry" (187). Until recently, details about her biography were scant. She was born in 1903, lived periodically in New York City, and died prematurely in the '30s. In addition, most sources—from academic books to Wikipedia—provided one other piece of demographic data: she was African American.[1] But that was not the case. Tankersley Young was white.[2] Her supposed blackness is likely rooted simply in the fact that she wrote some poems about race and racism and published in, among many other periodicals of the day, *Opportunity*, perhaps the foremost journal of African American culture and literature of the period, which led to her inclusion in later Harlem Renaissance themed anthologies.[3]

Thus, a uniformly white, avant-garde magazine with a title that seemingly misleads readers into expecting black music and culture was co-edited by a white poet who was later mistaken for black herself. What a curious coincidence! On their own, these facts, though interesting, might be ignored. But taken together, this confusion over blackness begs us to read *Blues* through the lens of race, which, up to now, no one has done. Indeed, I argue that we would be remiss if we overlooked the only contributions that reference blues, jazz, or black people at all, since titling and biographical factors emphasize the importance of blackness in this volume and its reception. These three contributions, all poems in markedly different styles, offer a range of perspectives on issues of race and interracial relations: "Gotham" by Witter Bynner describes a white academic's night of escape at a lively Harlem cabaret; "Suite" by Ford follows a speaker who, far from his racist, rural home, listens to popular jazz in an urban setting while psychologically struggling with his sexual encounters with men; and "Letter" by Tankersley Young is a lilting lyric that gradually reveals the physical and metaphysical trauma of a lynching and its aftermath.

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[1]This inaccuracy in her Wikipedia page has been corrected as of the publication of this article.

[2] White first pointed out that Young was introduced as "a young white woman" in an article by Countee Cullen—one of the preeminent poets of the Harlem Renaissance—in his column "The Dark Tower" in *Opportunity* (qtd. in White 254). More recently, misconceptions about Tankersley Young have been definitively corrected through the excellent editorial work and biographical research by Joshua Rothes and Eric La Prade in the recent *The Collected Works of Tankersley Young* published in 2022.

[3] Specifically, Tankersley Young was included in *Shadowed Dreams: Women's Poetry of the Harlem Renaissance*, edited by Maureen Honey and first published in 1989.

In the pages that follow, I will analyze these poems using theories of race and queerness while contextualizing them within modernist and avant-garde literature. All in all, these poems elucidate avant-garde modernism's relationship with black culture. On one hand, *Blues* shows that white, modernist avant-garde writers recognized the vitality of black culture and the serious ethical problem of racial inequality and violence. Further, these poems, to different degrees, demonstrate affinity with or connection to black culture in a way that suggests a shared sense of marginalization, particularly for queer authors—and indeed, neither Bynner, Ford, nor Tankersley Young were (strictly) heterosexual. But while these poems show an affinity for black culture, they can also reduce black life and culture to mere symbols, calling cards of a sort, to show the writer is a progressive rule breaker. In this way, I argue that *Blues* exemplifies the way empathy for the social marginalization of black culture can become a kind of cultural capital in white avant-garde circles while black creators themselves are simultaneously excluded.

I. Modernism, Little Magazines, and Blues

Literary periodicals like *Blues*, often referred to simply as "little magazines," are crucial to studying modernist literature. Modernist magazines, editors, and the broader networks that united them were central to establishing the reputations of certain authors and texts. Indeed, the canonical works of modernism—for instance *Ulysses* and *The Waste Land*—were initially published and found notoriety in magazines. In the 1990s and early 2000s, scholars like Jayne Marek, Lawrence Rainey, and Mark Morrison drew increased attention to the essential role of ephemeral periodicals and their editors and contributors in the development of early twentieth century literature. In 2004, the Modernist Journals Project began an ambitious digitization project, providing open access to scores of magazines. These and other developments led Sean Latham and Robert Scholes to breathlessly declare the "Rise of Periodical Studies" in an article of the same name published in *PMLA*. In the intervening years, there have been numerous consequential academic books on modernist little magazines—for example, Scholes and Clifford Wulfman's *Modernism in the Magazines* (2010) or Peter Brooker and Andrew Thacker's multivolume *Oxford Critical and Cultural History of Modernist Magazines* (2009-2013)—and there have been even more journal articles published on

modernist magazines—in fact, the *Journal of Modern Periodical Studies* has focused entirely on these sources since its founding in 2010. Even though *Blues* was Ford's first editorial venture, the magazine was a successful venue for avant-garde writers of the modernist period, featuring contributions from canonical authors like William Carlos Williams, Gertrude Stein, and Hilda Doolittle (H.D.) to name just a few and can offer insights into the workings of the modernist avant-garde in the period.

But studying a periodical can also provide broader understanding of the culture in which it was produced. Rooted in, as Latham and Scholes described, "the cultural turn in departments of language and literature" (517), contemporary modernist periodical studies often foreground issues of cultural critique. According to Patrick Collier, the object of the cultural approach in periodical studies is analysis of "the functioning of culture, or of particular historical cultures and their discourses, particularly as they have instantiated, reproduced, and provided fields for the negotiation of power relations" (102). Thus, *Blues* can provide us insight not only into modernist literature but also into the social forces that shaped this literary world.

In early 1929, Ford published the first issue of his magazine from his new home in Mississippi; on the masthead of the first issue, Ford was editor, and Tankersley Young was associate editor, and, despite the persistent advice from Tankersley Young, the title was *Blues: A Magazine of New Rhythms*. So why was Ford so stuck on this misleading title? In autobiographical writing many years later, Ford himself explained: "I loved the Blues before I loved the Poem. Somehow the two loves were from the same source. So it was natural that I called my poetry review *Blues*" (*Water* 183). This one response does not explain his pointed ignoring candid advice that it was a bad title. And in any case, what could that "same source" be? Contemporary scholar White muses that Ford could have "felt that it captured the 'rhythms' of malaise, barrenness and cultural exhaustion that were gripping American modernists during the build-up to the stock market crash of 1929" (188). Alexander Howard asks if Ford, who was "a relatively well-to-do white American male hailing from the Deep South," was "appropriating specifically African-American cultural forms? A kind of modernist minstrelsy?" (25). For Howard, Ford is "at best simply unaware of the implications presupposed by such an act of cultural appropriation" (25). On the other hand, in one of Tankersley Young's letters to Ford at the time, Tankersley Young suggests that "blues" as a term is simply

"new" (Letter). She surmises that one reason Ford might like the name is because it is itself modern (Letter). And indeed, though blues was rooted in nineteenth century black culture and music, it was exploding in popularity in the 1920s and was a particularly novel form for white audiences of the time.

Perhaps this sense of newness in a cultural form would be particularly important to an avant-garde writer like Ford who wanted to break with tradition and explore new literary forms. Jed Rasula argues that in European avant-garde circles the blues' related form jazz became a symbol of cosmopolitan modernity, and as such "jazz was affixed to pronouncements and activities of the avant-garde like a decal on a traveler's bag" (14). Similarly, Ford, himself a devotee of the European avant-garde, stamps his modernist journal with "blues" as a signifier of a new, nontraditional cultural form but in doing so divorces it from its cultural context.

Neither Ford nor Tankersley Young penned any sort of editorial statement or manifesto in the first or second issue, but in the second, preeminent modernist poet William Carlos Williams wrote a critical piece titled "For a New Magazine" that acts as a kind of statement of ideals. It begins with a statement of contemporary literature that sounds emphatically gloomy (and honestly a bit ironic following criticism of the confusing title): "Blues is a good name for it, all the extant magazines in America being thoroughly, totally, completely dead as far as anything new in literature among us is concerned" (Williams, "For a New Magazine" 30). Williams continues: "Literature, poetry especially, is to invent. It is not to invent emotions, though there may be a few that were missed formerly. But it is to invent mechanisms of expression suitable to the keenest intelligence of the time who, struggling with emotion, find the mechanisms formerly adequate to ensnare or vent them inadequate" (31). Thus, Williams places the magazine firmly in a category of formal innovation. As Howard describes, the "hybrid mixture of local, cosmopolitan, and internationalist experimentalism" found in the pages of the journal acted as "a metaphorical crucible in which a variety of decidedly diverse voices were able to interact, clash, ferment, and develop into discernible poetic identities and sensibilities" (31). *Blues* was, in a word, experimental or, as Ford might have preferred, avant-garde. The contributions of the journal are often formally experimental, from broken sonnets to non-narrative drama. In addition, the magazine foregrounded texts by non-heterosexual authors. Indeed, Ford himself was

queer, as was Tankersley Young,[4] and they were soon joined by a second associate editor, gay New York poet Parker Tyler, with whom Ford would cowrite *The Young and Evil* in 1934, often cited as the first gay novel in the U.S. And indeed, *Blues* even billed itself as a "Bi-Sexual Bi-Monthly" (Howard 31). Thus, the magazine itself could also be called "queer," in that, first, it invited work by writers of any and all sexualities and, second, that it aggressively challenged normative standards of traditional literary forms.

II. "Dark Bodies": Witter Bynner and Jazz Cabaret Primitivism

So how would this queer, avant-garde journal interact with black culture? The first text to reference blues or jazz in the magazine comes in the second issue, but it is not in a piece by Ford or Tankersley Young. In the poem "Gotham," Bynner describes the chaotic vitality of a Harlem jazz cabaret for a white visitor. Born in New York in 1881, Bynner was Harvard educated. He began his literary career writing for *McClure's* where he was soon building relationships with other young writers, for example Ezra Pound. He published extensively in modernist magazines. And in the early twentieth century, he was after rainfed with such poets as Edna St. Vincent Millay and Carl Sandburg. But Bynner was not without criticism of new modernist forms. In fact, he and his friend, poet Arthur Davidson Fick, perpetrated a notorious hoax mocking modernist poetic forms when they took on pen names and invented a new school of poetry, complete with a book of poems in a pretentious style they called "Spectra" (Kraft 1-2). All in all, Bynner was a more established and influential poet than Ford or Tankersley Young and brought some measure of institutional capital to their journal.

Bynner's poem "Gotham" describes a period in the mid-1920s when white revelers flocked to Harlem cabarets to listen and dance to black music, a time Langston Hughes called the "Negro vogue of the 20's" (224).[5] Indeed, the craze often reduced jazz cabaret culture of the time to an emblem of hedonism and moral liberalism. As Shane Vogel explains: "With their intimate interaction between performer and spectators, illicit alcohol consumption, social dancing,

[4] Ford identified as bisexual during the publication of the journal but would identify as gay later in life. And though Tankersley Young was twice married to men, she had affairs with both women and men (La Prade and Rothes xiii).

[5] In fact, Hughes titles a whole chapter of his autobiography *The Big Sea* "When the Negro Was in Vogue."

potential for interracial contact, public displays of sexuality, and underworld connotations, Harlem's cabarets provided a powerful symbol of the pleasure and dangers of urban life" (2). But it is important to note that this sexual liberation extended beyond traditional sexuality, as jazz cabarets often "allowed for a range of sexual subjectivities, arrangements of masculinity and femininity, libidinal possibilities, and identificatory relationships" (21). Thus, Bynner, who was also gay, might have been interested in the sexually open and dynamic atmosphere of a 1920s jazz club.

But Bynner's poem does not begin in the jazz cabaret but rather at a dull party for academics:

> Our host was a dish of marble fruit,
> Every colour and curve arranged to seem real
> . . . His fingers were as dead as the white grapes,
> His eyes as the blue grapes.
> (lines 1-2, 5-6)

The party's host is essentially a statue, devoid of life. But more specifically the language here suggests whiteness—both in the use of marble, recalling white sculptures, and blue eyes. The other party guests become clear in the following stanza: "And there were professors / Around the whiteness of the sepulchral table / Plucking at the weight under which they were buried" (lines 7-9). Again the "whiteness" of this setting is emphasized as a group of professors attempt to socialize. But this white scene is at once dead and burdensome. There is no life in this setting or in this group of people.

And so the speaker decides to leave. "I hurried away from them to Harlem," he explains, "And danced at a cabaret till dawn" (Bynner, lines 13-14). The scene at the cabaret is far livelier, as the speaker dances alongside "dark bodies / Waving for poise / Like wings on a dark twig" (lines 15-17). Instead of the deathlike pallor of the professor's dinner party, the "dark" dancing bodies flutter like leaves on a sprouting tree, ready to take flight into the air. The speaker joins the dance, "[I] hugged to my heart the cymbals and drums / And rose up to the long yowl of the saxophones" (lines 18-19). When night fades into morning, the speaker walks home alone through the "blankness of stone" that is the urban landscape of New York City, dreaming of the "fence-rail[s]" and "apple blossoms" of his pastoral youth (lines 40-42). Musing in the blue

light of dawn, the speaker addresses the reader: "Have you neared heaven, as I have / In the azure body of a bird?" (lines 43-44). Thus by going to a jazz cabaret, the speaker is rejuvenated from the deathly whiteness of his life by regressing to memories of his childhood in a simpler time and place.

But what about the actual black people? The speaker only actually speaks to a black person in the poem one time when he is leaving the club:

> A black woman, looming,
> Solicited me
> With a voice like the larger wires of a harp
> And I answered 'Hell, no!'
> With a voice like a bang on a banjo. (Bynner, lines 29-33).

Thus, the only time he actually talks to any black people, he acts insulted and is unapologetically rude. Overall, Bynner's poem demonstrates a kind of regressive logic as it relates to jazz, Harlem cabaret culture, and black culture more generally. That is, the speaker of the poem engages with black culture in order to regress to a purer state, closer to his childhood. For the speaker of this poem, and for many other real or fictional white visitors to Harlem clubs, the philosophical underpinning of the Negro Vogue was what Alain Locke, famed leader of the New Negro movement, called a "cult of primitivism" (88). According to Locke, this primitivism was a "symptom of a profound cultural unrest and change, first a reaction from Puritan repressions and then an escape from the tensions and monotones of a machine-ridden, extroverted form of civilization . . . . Its devotees, especially at the height of the craze rationalized this in a complete creed and cult of primitivism" (88). The white fascination with jazz cabarets and black culture was generally not an equal cultural exchange but was rather a way for participants to escape the rigid complexities of an industrialized capitalist society rooted in Puritanism into a simpler and less restrictive state of being.[6]

Although a visit to a nightclub would seem a social activity, the purpose of this primitivism is not social but is rather about interior change. In his book

[6] Locke thought that both white and black patrons were participating in this "cult of primitivism," but since Bynner's poem comes from the perspective of a white visitor, I am focusing this quote on that context.

Literary Primitivism, Ben Etherington argues that primitivism "is not an idea or representation but the anguished yearning of discontent that seeks self-transformation toward the primitive" (8). That is, primitivism only works for those outsiders who see themselves as more advanced or complex and who desire to use a marginalized culture to transform themselves into a purer version of themselves. In this way, an individual can exploit the marginalized culture for personal enrichment and escape from their own sterile culture while simultaneously feeling superior to the people who enable their transformation. And because of this, white tourists in Harlem could participate in black culture without actually supporting racial justice. As Steven C. Tracy notes in an essay on Williams and *Blues*, jazz, and jazz musicians "represented a way for white intellectuals to free themselves rather than an argument for intellectuals to commit to freeing African Americans. Therefore, the music was perceived as a potent analogue for the revolution in contemporary literature, but not as a catalyst for revolution in contemporary race relations" (20). The speaker of Bynner's poem is at the cabaret not to commit to civil rights but for his own personal development. And though the speaker clearly represents himself as a revolutionary rule-breaker who criticizes and opposes upper-class white culture (while still participating in it), he condescendingly distances himself from actual black people. But what makes this poem so frustrating is that Bynner himself was actually a supporter of black writers.[7] Notably, Bynner, an older and more established writer, supported and advised Countee Cullen, recommending the younger poet's work to editors, even awarding Cullen and Hughes his "Witter Bynner Undergraduate Poetry Award" in the mid-1920s (Potter 53-55). Thus, while in his personal life he was supportive of contemporary black writers, Bynner contributes a poem to *Blues* that deals in primitivist tropes, demonstrating a racial ambivalence.

III. "My Face Like White Silk": Charles Henri Ford and the Blues Soundtrack to Queer Life

As *Blues* developed, two more poems that utilized black culture would appear, and these poems would offer more complex representations of racial relations than the egotistical simplification of primitivism. Ford's poem "Suite"

[7] Bynner's thoughts on race relations were at times contradictory. As Kraft points out, Bynner also made public racist comments supporting white supremacy (7).

specifically uses popular blues music to make a connection between the parallel oppression of racial and sexual minorities. Ford was only around nineteen years old when in 1928 he first conceptualized *Blues*, but the magazine would mark the beginning of a long and varied career. Born in Mississippi, Ford's literary ambitions would take him all over the world and would connect him to a who's-who of twentieth century literary figures including Pound, Williams, and Djuna Barnes among others. Following *Blues*' run, his career would move from the avant-garde modernism expressed in *Blues,* to the world of surrealism in his next magazine enterprise *View*, to a pop art phase and connection to Andy Warhol in the 1960s, and on through successive decades and artistic periods until his death in 2002 in New York City.[8] And it all started with *Blues*.

But when he first decided to publish the journal, Ford was just a teenager living in San Antonio, Texas—far from the literary metropoles of modernism—who dreamt of a life in the cosmopolitan literary world. From his outpost in the American Southwest, Ford became an active participator in the networks of modernism in his teens, submitting poems to numerous publications and corresponding with various literary figures. In 1927, Ford was featured in the First National Poetry Exhibition in Greenwich Village, a project masterminded by bohemian artist Luther Widen, better known by his pseudonym "Lew Ney" (pronounced—intentionally—as "looney") and by his honorary title the "Mayor of Greenwich Village."[9] Fortuitously, Ney and his wife and collaborator Ruth Widen happened to know another young poet who was also in San Antonio: Tankersley Young. And it was with Tankersley Young that he would first sketch out and then bring to print a new magazine.

"Suite" was published in the seventh issue of that magazine, which is significant issue because, as Howard argues, the issue represents a turning point at which the magazine both reaches its aesthetic and editorial maturity and also dials up its queer content (45-46, 48). And Ford's "Suite" is certainly one of those texts in this issue that foregrounds non-normative sexuality. Stylistically, the poem is a dense block of text, a prose poem comprised of tortuous sentences with no capitalization, limited punctuation, and frequent misspellings. Indeed, the poem seems to establish formal rules—for example no apostrophes for contractions—only to suddenly break that rule for seemingly no reason.

[8] See Howard for a detailed account of Ford's life and work.

[9] For an account of the strange and creative life of Ney and his role in Bohemian circles in New York, see the fascinating article "The True and Honest Story of Lew Ney, Greenwich Village Printer" by Julie Mellby.

Moreover, the elliptical language, sometimes omitting key words in a sentence or suddenly switching to a new topic, makes the shifting content difficult to understand. One way to understand Ford's style in this piece is through his deep connection to surrealism. Although he was involved in numerous experimental literary and visual art forms during his decades-long career, when asked in a 1987 interview what the "consistent thread" that united his eclectic life's work, he responded simply: "surrealism."

In this sense, we can read "Suite" as guided by the unconscious flow of thought or dream logic which often characterizes surrealist writing. The first sentence uses this style to describe the setting of the poem and to suggest a dark, sexual subtext:

> after after not at all times and ever but the next seven ante meridiem then when the yellow-on-green light emergingly oblique denied the brittle air: then the underside of fingers took a slight touch on a doorknob the wristbone tremulous there was the bed there was the body the purple mouth the blood and saliva on the pillow in one small circle of disgrace. (Ford 31)[10]

The poem offers a series of images that suggest sexual violence or at least a dark subconscious association between sexuality and violence: "the body," "purple mouth," and "blood and saliva" lead to a "circle of disgrace" that is fresh bodily fluid marking the bedding. The poem then shifts to a first-person perspective as the speaker describes a state of emotional distress: "as for me i held my breath in the center of my lungs and drew consciousness back into my brain until i felt a kernel there for this is the way i thought i cant be crying i cant be twisting my fingers but no one will see how deeply nails can sink into palms" (31). The speaker becomes conscious of the setting gradually—though not, it seems, waking from sleep but from some psychological block. Later in the poem, the speaker further elaborates the setting:

> [C]hicago is not a town to sneer at neither to grow sentimental over: you can stand under the el at five or fivethirty or six and talk as loud as you want to and nobody will hear you: at night walking

[10] In the following quotes from this poem, all of the nonstandard punctuation, spelling, and capitalization is per the original magazine publication.

> on michigan avenue nobody will see you for the automobiles rush by too fast. (31)

While much of the poem suggests the speaker lives in isolation—"daytimes i am by myself and play the victrola"—he does engage in certain social occupations. For instance, walking along Michigan Avenue the speaker picks up a partner: "if you take it to your room it might say itaintnatural but anyway curse a in memphis who had the and if you dont believe it i'll show you" (Ford 31). The omissions and syntactic vexations of the sentence make it difficult to understand, but the speaker is taking someone back to his place, a person he both objectifies and avoids gendering the person by using the pronoun "it." But even so, the potential partner is muttering "it ain't natural," which generally suggests a non-normative coupling. Any obscurity about the gender of this person made clear in the next sentence: "yes i sat beside him in the darkness with my face like white silk" (31-32). Recalling the disordered bed at the beginning of the poem, we can assume the speaker and this man—alone together in the dark—either will or have participated in the "unnatural" act of queer sex.

Interestingly, it is when this same-sex content becomes more direct that the speaker reasserts his whiteness, defining it against the darkness. The description could highlight a contrast between the speaker and his partner who seems to fade into the darkness both literally and figuratively. That is, perhaps the speaker emphasizes his whiteness here because the other man is black. Unfortunately, and perhaps pointedly, there is no physical description of the man to know for certain. But it is more than a lack of description; the linguistic deterioration and elliptical narration that characterize the style of this poem actually serve to suppress any physical description of the other man. Essentially, this avant-garde style functions to code the sexual and possibly interracial content of the poem.

However, the speaker's urban life is not the only setting or context in the poem. At one point, the focus of the poem suddenly shifts to a section that reads like a quote from a letter: "he sells stuff for his papa jane wrote virginia" (Ford 31). Here, the poem moves to a more pastoral location and lifestyle. The topic of the letter's snippet—an elderly man growing tomatoes—suggests a rural setting, which is distant from the speaker. Further, it presents familial details that suggest that this is the speaker's family back home: "hes been working in

the garden it is wonderful how he does can you beat that working in the and eightyeight years stop passing the tomatoes every time i look around youre passing me the tomatoes" (31). This downhome narrative continues briefly before breaking into talk addressed to a young girl: "boutiful she sad with her mith. there was a witwet on the dodress and i told her youre a bigirl noo: i set anna your a big curl nooow" (31). The strange or silly spelling and pronunciation suggests the speaker is using a kind of baby talk to converse with the girl. These details—Jane, Virginia, an old man gardening, a little girl—all seem to paint a picture of heteronormative rural or smalltown life.

But this rural life is not as idyllic as it might seem. The baby talk is suddenly interrupted by a parenthetical in clear and direct language that brings race to the forefront of the poem with a shock: "(she said she dreamed all the *time* of a large-negro-with-pink-lips chasing her.)" (Ford 31). It is a startling line that suggests this rural, pastoral setting is defined by subconscious prejudice or out-and-out racism. But who is the "she" who says this? Is it the same Jane or Virginia mentioned as writing the letter? What is the speaker's relation to her? The elliptical poem does not directly answer these questions; however, the speaker does reveal his confusion about at least one relationship back home: "i couldnt have said could i i couldnt have come right out like that and said i dont love you anymore im sorry darling but i don't" (32). Thus, it seems the speaker has a pre-existing relationship with someone else and is struggling with whether or not to end it. And after his sexual encounters with men, the indecision persists: "for even after that in bed i thought yes. yes i do. yes i . . do. i do" (32). Ultimately, the confusion reaches an emotional crescendo, the climax of the poem: "screaming over longdistance *but darling why?*" (32). The internal conflict, then, is manifesting in a very material issue: should he break it off with his "longdistance darling" back home or continue pursuing queer encounters in the city? In short, the speaker is living a double life. And given the heteronormative description of his distant home and his intense confusion over his queer trysts, the likeliest explanation is that he has a girlfriend or even fiancé back home.

The psychological difficulty he describes throughout the poem, then, is an internal conflict between his urban life of anonymous same-sex encounters (possibly with non-white men) and his rural life of normative (and racist) heterosexual relationships. But the speaker's distress goes beyond tortured confusion and into outright self-destruction:

> do not ask me if i care no more for wilde and let us go down to the store and select a suit. there is so little to do here. all day yesterday i listened to ethel waters on the victrola crying am i blue forgetting a body still still and rigid with the dope in the veins not mattering. (Ford 32)

The speaker's sexual confusion and the attendant self-loathing that comes with it have manifested in depression and drug use by the end of the poem, as the speaker attempts to forget his physical existence. In addition, the reference to Oscar Wilde, whose sexual relations with men (while he was married to a woman) led to his downfall, is a clear corollary to the speaker's story.

But a key descriptor of the speaker's downward spiral in the final line is blues music. Indeed, the last sentence of the poem is the only place where blues—indeed, an actual blues song—appears in the journal *Blues* at all. Ethel Waters' hit song "Am I Blue?" was from the 1929 film *On with the Show!*, making it in fact a new release in terms of the poem's publication. Waters was a black singer from the Northeastern U.S., who rose to stardom on the vaudeville circuit. She gained such a high profile on stage that Hollywood producers took notice, and "Am I Blue?" was written specifically for her. The song would become enormously popular and would go on to be covered myriad times over the years (Albert 182-83). But why is this song so important? Why mention both title and singer when the speaker does not give his own name or the name of his lover? For one, blues is simply important to the poem because it is the musical form that is, simply put, unapologetically sad enough to capture the mood of the text. But also, the sadness of the blues is rooted in the sorrow and suffering because of oppressive nature of social hierarchy and marginalization.

In this sense, the title might appropriate not black culture specifically but rather a sense of marginalization or oppression. That is, *Blues* is allied with a creative form associated with an oppressed culture because poets and poetry—particularly of the avant-garde variety—are also marginalized within literary culture. Contemporary scholar Natalia Cecire argues that avant-garde and experimental writers throughout the twentieth century, "actively sought an oppositional politics through an epistemological clarity that was to manifest in language, and often this meant appropriating a minority position, however egregiously" (35). This is evidenced in *Blues* in another of Williams critical

statements. In "A Note on the Art of Poetry" published in the fourth issue, Williams writes that poetry must challenge the status quo of society in a way that invites danger and that true poetry is only found "where life is hardest, hottest, [and] most subject to jailing" (78). Thus, Williams considers poetic experimentation as literally dangerous, and the description of this life of the true poet—coming from the pen of a white male doctor—is one that in fact describes a life of oppression.

And perhaps—in both "Suite" and the titling of *Blues* overall—Ford correlates not just avant-garde writing but also sexual marginalization to racial oppression. That is, non-heterosexual people, like the speaker, are also marginalized in society, and thus these different types of marginalization create a point of sympathy. Indeed, in the mid to late twentieth century, non-normative sexuality came to be understood not just as aspect of individual psychology but as an "ethnicity model." While 1929 is a bit before this ethnicization of queer subjectivity, Christopher Nealon argues that writers of the early twentieth century often demonstrate a "struggle to escape the medical-psychological 'inversion' model of homosexuality that was dominant in the United States in the first half of the century and a drive toward 'people-hood' that previews the contemporary 'ethnic' notion of U.S. gay and lesbian collectivity" (2). In this sense, Ford might have parallels within the magazine—both in this poem and in the titling of the journal—between marginalized race and sexuality. And indeed, Ford had experience in his own life of the cultural intersection that was interracial queer culture. Specifically, Ford takes a chapter of his experimental (and semi-autobiographical) queer novel *The Young and Evil*, published a few years later, to describe a trip by the white queer protagonist and his friends (including one character who might be based on Tankersley Young) to a Harlem drag ball with music provided by a "negro orchestra" (Ford and Tyler 93). Thus, Ford himself had experienced black culture and music as a liberatory queer experience. That said, "Am I Blue?" is not a conventional blues song because, first, it is not in the traditional twelve-bar, three-line form, and second, it was written by white men (Albert 182-83). In this sense, though, the song is the perfect choice for the poem since it exemplifies the complex, unequal, and sometimes exploitative interrelation between white consumers and black performers in the jazz age.

IV. "The Thoughts That Come after White Darkness": Kathleen Tankersley Young and the Trauma of Lynching

The only other poem to address black life in *Blues* is Tankersley Young's delicate lyric poem "Letter," published in the same issue as Ford's "Suite." Although Tankersley Young's name nearly faded from literary records of modernism, recent editorial and scholarly work has brought her life and work into focus. Editors Erik La Prade and Joshua Rothes have recently published *The Collected Works of Tankersley Young* and in doing so have showcased her excellent poetry while also greatly clarifying her life story. Born Kathleen Tankersley in Texas in 1903, she married young and coincidently gained the name Young in 1921 but was tragically widowed not long after. And then as a widow in her early twenties, she embarked upon a literary career. She would live periodically in New York City and marry again in 1929. She was growing successful career writing and editing when in 1933, suddenly and under mysterious circumstances, she died (La Prade and Rothes xi-viv). Many of her letters survive in various archives, which give a sense of her voice and personality. After her death, Ney and Widen even published some of the letters that they received from Tankersley Young in their magazine *The Latin Quarterly*. Her letters typically here radiate with humor and give us a glimpse into her perspective on culture and life:

> Thank God, or whoever arranges things, that there is a Greenwich Village and a few little groups at universities who are outcasts from the respectable . . . and for murderers and colorful whores and dope fiends . . . for perverts both Lesbian and homos, and the others . . . for music that has no sentiment . . . for poetry that has no form . . . for the few honest minds who realize the small partition between all that is ridiculous and all that is beautiful . . . for lovers . . . for bootleg . . . and whatever comes out of all these things . . . fervently, amen. (Tankersley Young, "Extracts" 9)

Her passion for life and empathy for people who are marginalized in society is striking, and her love for diverse ways of being seems to have been an inspiration in both her life and in writing.

The working friendship with Ney and Widen was how Tankersley Young first met Ford. In her first letter to him, she writes: "One of the scrapbooks from the First National Poetry Exhibition that is being held in New York is in my hands. Mr. Ney mentions your name as one who would be interested in seeing it . . . I hope that you are an informal person. For it is an informal exhibit and I am the least formal of persons. I do not have any friends. I am interested in art, my poetry, people who write, think or can thrill equally over a bag of popcorn or a sunset" (qtd. in Howard 20). This invitation was warmly received by the young Ford and the two arranged a meeting at the library. According to Ford's journal entry following their meeting, he was drawn to her as a kindred spirit: "[h]ow I sympathize with her," he wrote, "living here with no people with her tastes, no nothing. Except lonesomeness" (qtd. in Howard 20). In another exciting turn of events, Ford expressed his interest in founding a literary magazine and Tankersley Young admitted that she too had thought of starting such a periodical. While Ford was undoubtedly the founder and editor of the magazine, Tankersley Young provided a great deal of advice (and lots of literal legwork in distributing copies of the magazine when they were published).

Tankersley Young's poem "Letter," also published in the seventh issue, presented a darker perspective on race. Although the tone of Tankersley Young's poem is lilting and gentle, it addresses one of the ugliest facets of American history: lynching. Such extrajudicial killings by mobs had long been a facet of U.S. culture and continued through the publication of *Blues*. In his 1933 book *The Tragedy of Lynching*, Arthur F. Raper notes that in 1930—the year after Tankersley Young published "Letter"—twenty-one people were recorded as lynched in the U.S. (1). However, the work of anti-lynching activists had brought increasing scrutiny on the practice as a form of white supremacist domination, and the numbers of its occurrences were decreasing in the early twentieth century (Wood 218). And it would be a mistake to assume that opposition to the horrific practice had taken hold only in the North; since "forward-looking white southerners were compelled to adopt the position that lynching was barbaric and disgraceful" (261). As a native Texan with a cosmopolitan literary life, Tankersley Young was without a doubt such a progressive with Southern roots, and "Letter" shows both her compassion toward victims of racial violence and acts as a marker of Tankersley Young's progressive mindset. Though Tankersley Young's poem is definitely an attack on the brutality of white supremacy, it takes an indirect approach to the

horrifying topic by gradually revealing the brutal act through the course of the poem.

Despite the title "Letter," the poem is not in a specifically epistolary form, though it does consist of a first-person speaker addressing an unidentified second person. In fact, the poem—though over thirty lines long—is actually comprised of just one complex sentence. The single-stanza poem consists of eight independent clauses connected with colons, a linguistic and aesthetic device that Tankersley Young used often in her poetry. It is a stylistic choice but also a rhetorical choice; it conveys a sense of slow movement through clauses, suggesting that each progressive clause is further elucidating the specific point of the overall text, with the ultimate meaning only arriving with the terminal punctuation of the final line. Each clause begins with "I know" and the first and last clause begin more specifically with "I know what you are thinking" (Tankersley Young, "Letter" lines 1, 27). The anaphora creates a sense of repetition while the mirroring of the beginning and ending clauses creates a feeling of cyclicality. Although it is a statement, "I know what you are thinking" becomes a question for the reader, a central question in fact that dominates the poem. While it would seem that the last clause before the final period would hold the ultimate answer, it only indirectly suggests the truth and gestures back toward the beginning. Thus, the formal and rhetorical structure is not so much about finding a fact or answer but lingering on the consideration.

As the poem begins, the speaker does not immediately describe what the thought is or even who the "you" is. Rather, the speaker starts by describing the time of year in which the poem is set: "now that leaves fall, / and crisp moons are arched over slowly cooling winds" (Tankersley Young, "Letter" lines 2-3). It is autumn: the season of harvest and the transition into the winter. The "slowly cooling winds" have begun to blow and "scatter the late pool-lillies" (line 5). Thus, the temporary setting is shifting into winter, the season of death. And the word "late" to describe the water lilies implies a late blossom in the season but also recalls a euphemism for dead as well. As the poem continues, the speaker shifts again to what the second person is thinking but, again, not to the actual content, but rather to the feeling of it:

> I know what this thing is that you hold,
> the solid hours, the thing you keep

between your mind and body,
brilliant as blown glass, heavy as an iron shaft (lines 6-9)

The thought is held like a solid object, but it is also an intangible period of time. This is a group of hours, then, that the second person is thinking of—a short period or event, which is both "brilliant" and "heavy." But it is kept by this person in the liminal space between body and mind. And if we think of it literally, what separates mind from body is death. And although the pastoral setting of the poem is clearly stated, the increasingly contradictory description of the place suggests a kind of unearthly or atemporal location: "I know the mornings you have, / (they never come here)" (lines 15-16). How does the second person have mornings if they never come? Or are the speaker and the addressee in different places? If so, how then does the speaker know so much about this setting? On the level of language, "morning" is a homophone for the darker "mourning." Thus, if the "you" is already dead, this unreal, contradictory landscape could then be a kind of afterlife, a limbo.

As the speaker gradually reveals that this second person is dead, the physical body of the addressee and its location sharpen into focus. The speaker continues: "harsh sounds of leaves grate on your sleeves, / pigeons nestle to your fingers, / clouds, over, swinging to your eyes" (Tankersley Young, "Letter" lines 18-20). The "harsh" sound of leaves "grat[ing]" unpleasantly disturbs the dreamy language of the first half of the poem. Generally, leaves brushing against an object is hardly a grating sound; it is rather the truth of this body's location that creates this negativity. Leaves and birds brush against the person's body while the clouds appear to swing. But this must be a trick of perspective; that is, it is not the clouds that are swinging in the tree but the addressee's body. Thus, the grim truth hits suddenly: this person has been hanged. But that is not the whole extent of the crime. The speaker closes the poem:

I know what you are thinking
birds to your fingers, and remembering,
and the white hot thing,
heavy and brittle between
the swinging body and the cooling mind. (lines 27-31)

Until these lines, the temperature of the poem has been consistently cooling. Only here do we see any heat in the poem. The "white hot thing" evokes a sense of burning heat and indicates the addressee was not only hanged but also burnt. Hanged and burnt, it ultimately becomes clear that this person was lynched.

Those "hours" held between and thus separating mind from body are the events of the brutal murder, yet that violence is never directly described. This poem dwells on a horrible event without retelling it, without even directly remembering it, seemingly trapped in the aftermath. Even in its ending, the cyclical form of the poem suggests the speaker and the victim will again and again try to process this trauma without every quite reaching a resolution. In this way, we can understand that the speaker is addressing the victim after death, in a sort of metaphysical conversation. And in this afterlife state, the addressee has for the most part let go of the trauma: "walking on leaves, talking: 'it does not matter,' / the winds, and the leaves, and the dark making it matter" (Tankersley Young, "Letter" lines 21-23). The victim has essentially left behind the physical world and tells the speaker that it no longer matters. Despite the addressee's resignation, what remains—the chill wind, the scraping leaves, the darkness of the body's flesh—all these things insist up the importance of the person's death. The speaker notes: "I know the slow white water, / and the snow later, / and the thoughts that come after white darkness:" (lines 24-26). The speaker knows that soon "white" water will wash away the awfulness of the event, and white snow will essentially cover it up. This horror will all be swept aside by white culture, as these events have been again and again. But the root of the "darkness" or evil is not in the victim's skin color but rather in the "white darkness" of murderous racism. It is murderous, white supremacist racism. The poem acts as a challenge to that "white darkness" and a memorial to the many lives lost racially motivated murder.

Tankersley Young's poem is most focused on real issues of black life and culture in the entire run of *Blues*, and it is surely the most sensitive toward black struggles against racism. And this was not the only poem she wrote about race or black culture. Indeed, this is likely the reason Tankersley Young was thought to be black herself—simply because she wrote about racial injustice. In truth, relatively few white poets were writing about lynching the 1920s, and hers demonstrates a profound sympathy. But while the poem clearly conveys the emotional or metaphysical toll of lynching, it lacks the urgency of many similarly themed poems from the period. But this might be the best approach

considering the audience of *Blues*. Remember that she published this in an avant-garde journal with readers who were surely mostly or entirely white. Perhaps she thought readers might skip over a more obviously political text and wrote the poem as a subtle puzzle meant to invite unsuspecting white readers in with lilting lyricality before slowly revealing a truly nightmarish reality.

V. Conclusion

Across all ten issues of *Blues*, these three poems are the only ones that actually relate to black music or culture at all. An analysis of these poems in the context of this magazine highlights the use of black culture and creative products by the white queer avant-garde during the modernist period. For Bynner, Ford, Tankersley Young—and other progressive-minded white writers of modernism—the blues and jazz became token of newness, by turns sorrowful and liberatory. In its transgressive potential, black music and culture could be used to transform an individual, usually white, through the reductive magic of primitivism. Black music could also provide a soundtrack to someone struggling to come to terms with a non-normative, marginalized sexual identity. Indeed, for Ford, blues and jazz represented modern types of culture and socialization which were oppressed by the mainstream, both in terms of queerness as outside the boundaries of normative sexuality and as avant-garde writers working outside of acceptable literary forms. In addition, the horror of lynching could also inspire works like Tankersley Young's that use empathy to explore the metaphysical trauma of racially motivated violence, and this too becomes a marker of a progressive identity. Each of these poems is distinctly different but each shows the way a fascination with black music or culture can inspire poetry while demonstrating that the author is liberal-minded rule breaker.

Here, we can return to the question of why Ford chose *Blues* as the title for this magazine. To put it simply, blues and jazz became the background music for the interior development of white, cosmopolitan queer writers of the avant-garde. The writers discussed above all dabbled in black cultural products and were, to different extents, all concerned with racial justice. But they could also surely be accused of exploiting black culture. However, the purpose of this article is not to task these three writers with an inordinate amount of responsibility for early twentieth century U.S. racism. Indeed, it is highly probable that these authors were substantially less racist than most other

contemporary writers who were not mentioning black culture in their work at all. All in all, the poems discussed above each lie somewhere between celebration and appropriation, and as such, *Blues* demonstrates the complicated but marginal place of black culture in white avant-garde circles at the end of the 1920s. And while the scope of the above essay is limited to modernist literature, this use of black culture and music still persists in many ways even until today.

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