The Journal of Wyndham Lewis Studies

Volume 11 Article 4

12-1-2023

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Introduction: Racialized Shapes

In 1900, the year W. E. B. Du Bois delivered "The Exhibit of American Negroes" to the Paris Exposition, Vorticism's founder, Wyndham Lewis, was eighteen. Strong shapes were his favorites. In *BLAST 1* (1914), he writes that "the Modern World is due almost entirely to Anglo-Saxon Genius,—its appearance and its spirit" (*B1* 39). How exactly "Anglo-Saxon Genius" appears is unclear. In what theater of "the Modern World" is the spirit of that genius most recognizable? Ezra Pound insists that "RACE-MEMORY" must challenge and renarrativize the "PLACID, NON-ENERGIZED FUTURE" (*B1* 158). It's a familiar ultranationalist argument. What was lost—or stolen—in the past cannot make a future. It's in the proving ground of the present that the mettle of a race is tested. Yet the stubborn fact remains: Du Bois's vortex, which visualizes an upwardly mobile Black community in the American South, predates Lewis's Vorticism. It's actually Vorticism that looks like Du Bois's exhibit. In Du Bois's sociological imagination, the vortex does not plunge down, as it does in *BLAST*, but rather opens into the promise of a rising Black future. Nevertheless, the cross-current becomes a critical point of contact between two avant-gardes that ostensibly couldn't be further apart.

The instance also represents a crucial high-modernist interest. When we talk about the modernist project, as well as the atomized communities of avant-gardes that contributed to that project, we are often talking about shapes. The through-line that connects what Jed Rasula calls high modernism's "sprawl of clans" (2016, 51)—cubism, surrealism, symbolism, Dadaism, futurism, Vorticism, and so on—is the aesthetics of the shape. "Aesthetic Modernism has many gods," writes Alois Martin Müller. "It is a polytheistic complex, and like the Olympian gods, the gods of the avant-garde make war on one another" (1990). This essay will investigate one such theater—the vortex. By expanding our interpretations of the vortex to also include the ways in which Black artists used it to represent an emerging Black visibility, we produce a different understanding of Vorticism's place in the modernist epoch, not as a short-lived polemic associated only with Lewis's little magazine *BLAST*, but a means of visualizing and interpreting the new modes of cultural production that define aesthetic modernism itself.

That white artists are intertwined with Black cultural production is clear. Pound routinely located the doctrinal disruptions of standard English along the color line. Indeed, a great deal of Anglo-modernism depends on what Pound calls, in relation to boot polish, "BLACKING" (*B1* 53). By interpreting the conspicuous displays of white "blacking," we must also expand the boundaries of visual aesthetic modernism to include actual Blackness and its modes of cultural production. If "The Exhibit of American Negroes" (1900), got to the vortex first, narrativizing modernity through the visibility of the Black body, then the cosmopolitan drive of that Black visual avant-garde—which unspools the vortex, decolonizing Black subjects by insisting on the actual data of Black upward mobility—inevitably anticipates and counters the whirlpool of Lewisian Vorticism, which pulls the white hangers-on of Victorian London into its orbit, and sinks them in it. In their book *W. E. B. Du Bois's Data Portraits* (2018), Whitney Battle-Baptiste and Britt Rusert observe that "The Exhibit of American Negroes" features an explicitly "modernist design," which reflects "Du Bois' interest in representing the Black South as an integral part of modernity, a 'small nation of people' who shared more in common with the broader, future-oriented 'thinking world'" (14). Du Bois's sociological laboratory enabled a new kind of intentional modernist community complete with its own vortical avant-garde. By interpreting the points of contact and divergence between Lewis's and Du Bois's use of the vortex as one such "modernist design," we break ground on a new site of postcolonial reason: Black Vorticism.

That Du Bois worked in an explicitly visual register is unsurprising, as the visibility of Black economics had emerged to contend with white assumptions of Black pathologies. The economic facts of Black American life dispelled the pervasive notion of Black disorder to which racial stereotypes owed so much of their character. Yet the most striking aspect of the exhibit was the prismatic way in which Du Bois visualized his data. "He understood what Duke Ellington expressed thirty years later," writes Aldon Morris. "It don't mean a thing if it ain't got swing" (2018, 21, 23). One portrait titled *Assessed Valuation of All Taxable Property Owned by Georgia Negroes* employs a striking palimpsestic form, which, while statistically conclusive, is aesthetically tricky. It is, from the first, a space of play, possibly lending some of its aesthetic character to Bruno Abdank-Abakanowicz's spirograph, a toy whose interlocking wheels produce hypotrochoids and epitrochoids. This portrait asks the viewer to work the wheels themselves. If grafted onto three-dimensional space, the figure "would take a conical form, a vortex" (National Museum). The cone's deepest section corresponds to the least taxable property and vice versa. We read the portrait from the inside out, climbing out of the cone, passing through generations of economic improvements. The spiral uncoils. What was captured therein escapes. More interesting, however, than how we should read Du Bois's figures, is what they enable when we choose to consider these portraits also as aesthetic

objects: a series of striking vortical figures that are themselves rich sites of aesthetic observation and modernist research.

Much has been said about Anglo-modernism's appropriative element. While Pound was undoubtedly interested in Blackness as an aesthetic shortcut to progress, for Lewis, Blackness was less grammatical or aesthetical than historical. Echoing the nineteenth-century Young Hegelian Max Stirner, Lewis associates Blackness with a precultural barbarism, an antiquity based on the material surface of the world, rather than the pure spirit of liberalism that forged the abstract fictions of nation, state, and municipality in its white bourgeois image (Stirner 2005, 67). In *Paleface* (1929), Lewis writes that "the example [white people] have set to all other peoples of the world has been unfortunately enough in its mechanically sterility. . . . Let us draw back in time. Let us keep our noses well in the air. It is the White Man's Burden!" (*P* 22). Lewis objectifies not the aesthetics of Black expression but the pathologies he associates with Blackness. It encodes, for him, precultural freedom, an exit from liberalism. "The negro was in vogue," bemoans Langston Hughes, as white patrons began patronizing Black jazz clubs to see musicians like Duke Ellington (Hughes 1993, 228). Lewis observes that the problem of the "Dark Demon," Lewis's term for the fetish character of so-called African primitivism, had, in his view, become a "pet vice" for white artists (1969, 154). The African masks Picasso famously paints onto the women of *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* (1907) were becoming a standard of progress for white artists. When Lewis asked the Guyanese painter Denis Williams about the "Piccasoan" quality of his paintings, Williams responded: "It is not a case of my going to Picasso, Picasso came to Africa and to me" (Lewis 1949).

The modern artist is thus fashioned in the image of the imperial cartographer. To "make it new" required a global system of plundering aesthetically *new* objects and masks. Despite his misgivings, Lewis couldn't resist. In *BLAST 2* (1915), he calls Jacob Epstein's *Rock Drill* (1913), a vortical readymade that literally fashions primitivism into a tool, "one of the best things [Epstein] has done. The nerve-like figure perched on the machinery, with its straining to one purpose, is a vivid illustration of the greatest function of life" (*B2* 77). The rock drill bore into "the civilized hidden snares" that had, to Lewis, snuffed out the art impulse (*B2* 22). The tools of African primitivism, for white artists, enabled a refutation of the Victorian inheritance and the cosmopolitan energies that it engendered. Borrowed Blackness challenged Lewis's own economic alienation as the bored inheritor of colonial power.

For Du Bois, access to precisely the same economic and social capital Lewis spurned was essential to dispelling the imagination of Black disorder. James Weldon Johnson notes in his essay "The Dilemma of the Negro Author" (1928) that white audiences wanted to see African Americans as either "a simple, indolent, docile, improvident peasant; a singing, dancing, laughing, weeping

child," or as "an impulsive irrational, passionate savage, reluctantly wearing a thin coat of culture" (379). While Lewis's Egoism corresponds with a bored, post-Victorian English bourgeoisie, what Léopold Sédar Senghor calls "Negritude," a Black diasporic practice in the 1930s, locates Blackness as proximal to the proletariat to legitimize it: "The white man is the symbol of capital as the Negro is that of labor. . . . Beyond the black-skinned men of his race it is the battle of the world proletariat that is his song" (Sartre 1948, xl). Ironically, Lewis agrees; he writes that "the Negro is racially a sort of *Proletariat*" (*P* 35). Here, class encodes race and race becomes the residue of capital, a product of the division of labor. Claude McKay argues in *The Crisis*, the print organ of the NAACP that Du Bois edited, that Senghor's proletarian Blackness may be reductive: "The Negro in politics and social life is ostracized only technically by the distinction of color; in reality the Negro is discriminated against because he is of the lowest type of worker" (1921, 102).

That class is dilated to include race also helps describe Lewis's conflict with the nullity of bourgeois "Victorian Vampires" of which he is a resigned example. If Black subjects bear the ontological distinction of "the lowest type of worker," Lewis's monied rebellion, his "little conspiracy" (Lewis 2010, 122), recognizes what Marx refers to as the "sham existence" of the proprietary class: "The proprietary class and the class of the proletariat experience the same alienation. But the former class feels at ease and justified in this alienation, recognizing in it its source of power and the basis for a sham existence. Contrarily, the latter class feels destroyed in this alienation, recognizing in it its helplessness and the inhumanity of its existence" (Lukács 1970, 145).

We can perhaps revise Marx's dialectic to accommodate race. Lewis's Vorticism and Black Vorticism both evade capture, but just because they run away doesn't mean they run in the same direction. Lewis's vortex coils down, pulling London into the same maelstrom that sinks Phlebas the Phoenician in *The Waste Land*—a man of letters who enters the whirlpool and drowns. Black Vorticism, however, unspools the vortex, as the facts of Black upward mobility undo notions of its ascribed disorder. The linguistic whirlpool of M. NourbeSe Philip's long poem *Zong!* (2011), which describes the 1781 Zong massacre, floats the drowned enslaved histories back up to the surface. Philip's linguistic whirlpool explores drowning as a kind of thirst that kills—a baptism in the wa ter of want. (2011, 4)

In this whirlpool, the drowned float back, and the dead surface. While Lewis devoted his own rock drill to destabilizing his peculiar upper-class resentment, Black Vorticists were—and still are—building their own.

The Neighborhood: White Space and White Spaces

In *America & Cosmic Man* (1948), Lewis copies out a note for a speech Woodrow Wilson delivered on January 1, 1911. The note provides a taxonomy of American political organization:

> RADICAL—one who goes too far.
> CONSERVATIVE—one who does not go far enough.
> REACTIONARY—one who does not go at all.
> PROGRESSIVE—one who (a) recognizes new facts and adjusts law to them; and (b) attempts to think ahead constructively. (*ACM* 82)

The Reactionary, Lewis observes, indulges in their strict commitment to inaction. There is, then, indulgence, a kind of gluttony, in staying put. Both inaction and overreaction require conscious choice. For Lewis, "it is very difficult to respect a Progressive," because progressivism is rote: a nerve reaction to the latest iteration of the national program—a "soggy platitude" (83):

> The man who does not want to go anywhere we can understand—who does not want to go places, because all places at bottom are much the same. We can understand the man who wants to go where no man has ever gone before, where men say it is impossible, and highly unsuitable, to go. But what frankly can one say about the man who just wants to go as far as he is pushed? (82–83)

The new solutions of the progressive program are only the old ways heated back up. Progressives are always one step behind, fitting old solutions to new problems. Progressivism achieves only reversion, a return to automatic thinking and thoughtless subordination—a new feudal arrangement of the world. The progressive reforms of the Victorian era had succeeded only in creating serfs out of the middle class. Individuality and peculiarity had been liquidated to erect the municipal lordships of neighborhood, state, and nation. What can be said about those who only go as far as they are pushed when everyone is being pushed in the same direction? What emerges is, to Lewis, only "vegetable humanity"—the ontology of the middle class, which posits community in isolation, peculiarity in uniformity (*B1* 15). Tarr observes:

> A breed of mild pervasive cabbages has set up a wide and creeping rot in the West of Europe.—They make it indirectly a peril and tribulation for live things to remain in the neighbourhood. You are systematizing and vulgarizing the individual.—You are not an individual. You have, I repeat, no right to that hair and that hat. You are trying to have the apple and eat it too.—You should be in uniform, and at work. (*T1* 17)

At its most elemental, Vorticism is a lateral condemnation of "the neighbourhood"—an intentional organization of "mild pervasive cabbages." Liberalism had succeeded in decoupling the neighborhood from a specific place. Now the neighborhood was everywhere. Cosmopolitanism, the victory of progressive reform, had made neighbors out of everyone. "We all are sicknesses for each other" remarks Tarr (61)—stuck with each other, catching the same cold. Even the ostensibly countercultural and polemical dwindles into nullity and politeness. Tarr challenges his captive audience in some café to "observe how we ape the forms of conventional life in our emancipated Bohemia" (*T2* 19). Now, everyone, the bohemian and the worker, wore the same uniform, went to the same job, and rode steerage in the same boat.

A portrait of Alfred Stieglitz, taken by Gertrude Käsebier, illustrates a crucial way in which Vorticism and other related avant-gardes, which found their homes in the little magazines of modernism, represent "the forms of conventional life." White as a ghost, he's hardly there—a shade of his own portrait. Modernist art, so interested in portraying lack, finds absence everywhere. In Vorticist art, people lose their skin. The skeleton breathes. In the name of progress, its ruined machinery coughs steam. The bare mechanical leg of Lewis's 1912 painting *The Enemy of the Stars* (fig. 1) turns human parts into little engines. The rest is negative space—white space, the residual paper. That Vorticism depends on the ways in which its practitioners read white space as a deliberate coupling of racial performance and aesthetic technique complicates definitions of "white space" as an ostensibly agnostic aesthetic term. Indeed, the first printed use of the term arrives in 1888, just as the Victorian period is ending and early modernism is beginning (*Oxford English Dictionary* 2004). The term's first printing also coincides with the beginning of Stieglitz's career. His photo *The Steerage* (1907) captures the sterilization of white spaces. On the bottom deck, women fuss with their laundry. A woman's hood is down, and she stares past the camera, looking bored. Above, the men, reduced to vague shapes that block the light, seem content with their standing room. Toward the back, as the camera begins to lose its focus, the men look more like little buildings, a human skyline. Indeed, Stieglitz's most important work would become his photographs of skyscrapers. Hart Crane, in his first collection of poetry, *White Buildings* (1926), writes about "white cities" as though nobody had built them. Skyscrapers had merely blinked into existence.

> I meet you, therefore, in that that eventual flame
> You found in final chains, no captive then—
> Beyond their million brittle bloodshot eyes;
> White, through white cities passed on to assume
> That world which comes to each of us alone. (lines 46–50)

The chains are empty. There's no prisoner left to capture. The "white cities," full of "stenographic smiles and stock quotations" (line 6), which come "to each of us alone" are the poor inheritance of a culture, "the body of the world" (line 48) that has lost its will or its ability to create.

Spencer Gore's painting *Brighton Pier* (1913), included in *BLAST 1,* connects Stieglitz's photography to the Vorticist rejection of "vegetable humanity." The original painting charms in balmy pastels, while the printed version is dark, smeared, and brooding. The abstraction of Paul Cézanne's still-life paintings, which made the original *Brighton Pier* so depthless and instant, is redoubled here. The darker pastels change to shadows, the people to ghosts. The pier and the sky, both rendered in similar shades of pastel blue, turn white. "It is essential to approach [Vorticism] from the first as a retraction from experience and a correction of contemporary weaknesses in art" (line 4). To cleave a difference between Lewis and those "contemporary weaknesses," Vorticism is dogmatically conspicuous. It rejects the bonds of neighborliness.

Lewis's periodical *Tyro* sustains and augments *BLAST*'s hyper-conspicuous style by dedicating itself entirely to, very literally, getting in someone's face. The Tyros are all about faces. By fitting each Tyro with the Black mask of minstrelsy, the Tyro snuffs out the "white demon," obfuscating any trace of the physiognomy of white faces. Lewis wanted white London to get a good look at itself. The simpering faces of the Tyros echoed "the transformations of time and space wrought by the age of steam," which intensified racial visibility by making urbanization possible (Daly 2016, 404). Lewis argues that a growing interest in Black art driven by the fetish character of so-called African primitivism risked turning out white artists. Blackness, "The Dark Demon" of the cosmopolitan program, had run "Anglo-Saxon Genius" underground. The "white demon" must therefore pour "a cold a bath as possible" on the over-excitable white artist. "The Daimon of the white man, the authentic one, I mean," must be "as compelling as the 'dark' [one]" (Lewis 1969, 147).

Robert McAlmon's poem "White Males," included in the first issue of *Tyro* (1921), insists that cosmopolitanism inevitably degrades "racial purity":

> There would be no more white males.
> None so clear a white as these.
> Only some tinged with gray—dusty.
> But I could not watch them rush to the forest forever—
> Not one did I see arrive there—
> A cloud or night or blackness always intervened.
> I saw them rush forward and disappear,
> And then saw no more of them. (*TY1* 6)

The poem's white horses represent vanishing racial difference. "There [will] be no more white males," McAlmon warns, as increasing Black and white proximity will make interracial couplings inevitable.

> White stallions dashed by.
> I could see their teeth gleaming
> Through their lips as they sneered
> With death-laughter upon them. (*TY1* 6)

The dark mask of the Tyro—a composite caricature made of Blackness and Jewishness—that Lewis fits onto each Tyro, affixes comic "death-laughter" unto white faces. Produced the same year (1920–21), two Tyros—*A Reading of Ovid* and a self-portrait called *Mr. Wyndham Lewis as a Tyro*—share the same darkened complexion, the same broad, long nose, and a nearly identical baleful smile (figs. 2 and 3). Pound's 1918 remark that Lewis "is a collection of races" proves accurate (Edwards 2000, 194), as is an old promise from *BLAST 1*, that "dehumanization is the chief diagnostic of the Modern World" (*B1* 134). The Tyros synthesize racial difference into the same vulgar composite of experience: the organization of the neighborhood itself. The Tyros examine how conspicuous insult, by making the neighborhood mean, recasts goodwill and brotherhood as illusory and politically expeditious to a bourgeoisie that needs everyone to get along. What is an insult if not a sudden eruption of what civility has only submerged and failed to extinguish? T. S. Eliot writes in *Tyro 1*: "What is sometimes called 'vulgarity' is . . . one thing that has not been vulgarized" (*TY1* 2). Vorticism's insults, its misdeeds, and even its bad, humorless jokes navigate the outer reaches of the civility that the bourgeoisie has forged to maintain its own futurity. To Eliot, what seemed vulgar, or in bad taste, only seemed so because it had not yet been accounted for by the process of cultural reification. In Lewis's often noxious politics, insult, xenophobia, and racism are merely residues of civil society, an intentional obliteration of the cul-de-sac sweetness of the neighborhood that had only hidden hate.

Despite *BLAST* and *Tyro* being relatively small periodicals, even as far as modernist magazines go, the Vorticist argument survived within and beyond high modernism. Lewis's own recollection of Vorticism as "a program rather than an established fact" invites us to recontextualize Vorticism as not a single art movement, but rather a shared aesthetic technique that revels in conspicuous insult and outburst (Bond 2012, 34). Vorticism is "a provocative spectre," writes Robert Bond, "a semi-formed cultural undercurrent" that morphs chimerically throughout the twentieth century (2012, 34). William Carlos Williams's 1923 manifesto *Spring and All* sustains Vorticism's obliterative potential: "To it now we come to dedicate our secret project: the annihilation of every human creature on the face of the earth" (2011, 5). H. P. Lovecraft, a writer of horror,

was drawn to the polemics of the modernist argument, especially the radical potential of the vortex or spiral:

> In art there is no use in heeding the chaos of the universe. . . . I can conceive of no true image of the pattern of life and cosmic force, unless it be a jumble of mean dots arrang'd in directionless spirals. And so far are real dots and actual curves from depicting the utter formlessness and emptiness of life and force. (1965, 1.261–62)

To Lovecraft, Vorticism's subversive potential isn't its surrender to "chaos," but its application of it. Vorticism is "true" because it gives "curves" to "formlessness." Vorticism pulled into view the "emptiness of life" that was once only immaterial. In *Tarr*, Lewis's character Otto Kreisler observes that "his weakness drew him on, back into the vortex: anything at all was better than going back into that terrible colourless mood" (*T2* 108). The vortex becomes a means to represent a lack, a special sinking feeling.

It's not a coincidence that the modern infinitive form "to spiral" arrives in the early twentieth century, concurrently with the same modernist argument that interests Lewis, Williams, and Lovecraft. The earliest printed use of "spiraling" in the modern pejorative sense, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, is by Hart Crane, in 1922. Crane writes in a letter: "Under the influence of aether and amnesia my mind spiraled to a kind of seventh heaven of consciousness" (*Oxford English Dictionary* 2004). Google Ngram viewer shows that adjacent phrases such as "spiraling down" and "downward spiral" grow steadily in popularity, until they explode in the 1990s. By the time of the release of Nine Inch Nails' 1994 masterwork *The Downward Spiral*, recorded in the same house where the Manson murders occurred, the death drive represented by the vortex felt familiar enough to be a kind of generational banner. A compilation of remixes titled *Further Down the Spiral* (1995) even features a haunting image of a severed coiled rope for its album cover. On the last song of *The Downward Spiral*, "Hurt," Trent Reznor sings: "You can have it all / my empire of dirt." Reznor's articulation of the spiral echoes Lewis's. The dulled imperial mind has very little with which to build a self. It's entirely possible to read Vorticism as a postcolonial contradiction: imperialism critiqued from the perspective of the bored wielders of a languishing English colonial power. The Vorticists and their progeny liquidated their colonial past—an "empire of dirt"—to give up on the dream of an enduring English future. One can't help but consider Hazel Moates's reproach for modernity in Flannery O'Connor's novel *Wise Blood* (1952): "Where you come from is gone, where you thought you were going to never was there, and where you are is no good unless you can get away from it" (165).

Ships at a Distance: Toward a Black Vorticism

Fred Moten argues that Blackness represents an "irreducibly disordering, deformational force," which is nevertheless "absolutely indispensable to normative order, normative form" (2008, 180). Moten contends that "the strife between normativity and the deconstruction of norms is essential not only to contemporary Black academic discourse but also to the discourses of the barbershop, the beauty shop, and the book store" (178). Langston Hughes's observation that "the negro was in vogue" in 1920s Harlem is thus more spite than pride. A cosmopolitan interest in Black art, driven by new media and profiteering, did not obviate hundreds of years of colonial exploitation. Hughes's poem "Cubes" (1934) is a damning censure of the new forms of modernism and the emerging mainstream markets that drove them. The final stanza of the poem reads:

> Of course, the young African from Senegal
> Carries back from Paris
> A little more disease
> To spread among the black girls in the palm huts.
> He brings them as a gift
> disease—
> From light to darkness
> disease—
> From the boss to the bossed
> disease—
> From the game of black and white
> disease
> From the city of the broken cubes of Picasso
> d
> i
> s
> e
> a
> s
> e. (22)

The broken cubes of Picasso are, to Hughes, paradigmatic of an increasingly atomized—and cubed—modernity. To be a modern subject, filled with all the sensibilities of a modern consumer is to very literally be diseased. "At one level, the poet offers a trenchant critique of modernist art as a 'disease,'" writes Seth Moglen. "The poem suggests that the revolutionary aesthetic practices of his generation—practices for which Picasso's cubism stands as symbol and model—should be recognized as symptomatic expressions of a global system of exploitation that was deforming the lives of people around the world" (2002,

1192). Yet the poem's engagement with the formal experimentation of high modernism indicates both condemnation and culpability in equal portions. In Hughes's poem, "the young African from Senegal / Carries *back* from Paris / A little more disease" (emphasis mine). "The young African from Senegal" was in Paris to begin with, participating in the generation of new art forms now considered so elemental to the modernist project.

The work of Aaron Douglas, a visual artist often associated with the Harlem Renaissance, establishes what we may begin to understand as Black Vorticism. Both analogous and opposed to Lewis's sense of the vortical, Douglas's work applies the instantaneity of Lewis's vortical techniques and the depthlessness of Paul Cézanne's work to depictions of Black subjects. Douglas's work, included in James Weldon Johnson's book of poems *God's Trombones* (1927), sustains the fury and polemics of Lewis's Vorticism, supplementing it with a fraught cosmopolitanism that is equal parts joy, humility, and fear. The final illustration of the book, *The Judgment Day* (1939), depicts a series of figures waiting in what seems like a mixture of these affects. Douglas's avoidance of color, his choice of muted purples and greens, illuminates the less visible, or as Lee VanDemarr notes of Jean Toomer's *Cane*, what we both "want to look" at and "want not to look" at, as we are drawn more deeply into the American racial landscape (Scruggs and VanDemarr 1998, 136). Johnson's poem, which accompanies Douglas's painting, explores the liminal zone between what we want to look at and what we want to turn away from:

> And I feel Old Earth a-shuddering—
> And I see the graves a-bursting—
> And I hear a sound,
> A blood-chilling sound.
> What sound is that I hear?
> It's the clicking together of the dry bones,
> Bone to bone—the dry bones.
> And I see coming out of the bursting graves,
> And marching up from the valley of death,
> The army of the dead. (Johnson 2018, 54)

Defining "the army of the dead" is a quintessentially vorticist exercise. Certainly, "the army of the dead" is adjacent to the "feeble Europeanism" Lewis blasted in 1914 (*B1* 36). Likewise, the "clicking together of bones" echoes the machines that appear everywhere in *BLAST*. Yet, where Lewis hears the blast of steam as righteous, Johnson hears the clicking of bones—the little machines of the human body—as the death rattle of the human race.

The poetry of Henry Dumas, so often called associated with the afro-surrealist movement, represents a crucial overlap of Black avant-gardes. Johnson's "army of the dead" also marches through Dumas's poem "Kef 12":

> Take away the shape from the metal, sun.
> They are like stone, these people.
> Now make them lava. (Dumas)

The metal of the industrial age loses its shape. The people, frozen into stone, become lava. Here, form, racial and aesthetic, melts. A kind of terraforming occurs, as the lava softens into soil. "Dumas's is a world in which the broken glide by in search of the healing element," writes Amiri Baraka. "The very broken quality, almost to abstraction, is a function of change and transition" (1988, 165). Black Vorticism replaces the Anglo-modernist progress narrative of the second industrial revolution with lava, thickening "change and transition"—"a healing element." Afro-futurist music represents another such overlap. Olivier Messiaen's *Quartet for the End of Time* (1941) and Igor Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring* (1913), both epoch-defining epics of chamber music, are disrupting in their antagonistic sense of tonality and timbre, yet their rebellion is contained by that chamber. Paul Griffith notes that "Messiaen's music," as angular and dissonant as it is, "is most frequently tied to a pulse, which insists that all moments are the same" (1985, 15). Afro-futurist work such as Ornette Coleman's *The Shape of Jazz to Come* (1959), by replacing chordal harmony with complex melodic counterpoint bereft of standardized pulse or tonal center, escapes the chamber, a seat of white cultural power. It's no coincidence that Messiaen writes *Quartet for the End of Time* and Ornette Coleman writes *The Shape of Jazz to Come*, for representations of whiteness and Blackness are oriented toward different understandings of time. The intersecting Black avant-gardes do not, as Lewis does, blast aspects of their inheritance, but rather source a forward-looking Blackness from a stolen past (see also Carrington [2016]). At the same time, they fear that Du Bois's double vision of Black subjectivity may never be made one vision, that Blackness may never arrive. Zora Neale Hurston begins her novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) in dogged expectation: "Ships at a distance have every man's wish on board" (1). Blackness, as many Black Modernists understood it, is at once a past and a horizon. It demands access to its own past and a pathway into futurity.

Visualizing Black futures is a crucial concern for Black avant-gardes. James Van Der Zee's interest in the "determined optimism" of the portrait form articulates an important difference between the haunted white spaces of Anglo-modernism and the hyper-conspicuousness of the Black body in Black modernism (Thaggert 2010, 23). Van Der Zee's photography portrays the Black body as aesthetically "new," to commandeer Pound's familiar dictum. Miriam Thaggert argues that his portraits render "temporally and aesthetically distinct representations of Black life and bodies undermine assumptions about the Black body as 'non-art'" (2010, 23). Van Der Zee's subjects are always rendered with extreme clarity, the environment behind them only

an accident. One can't help but think of their creepy yearbook photograph, complete with a background of fake foliage. It's only the body that's important. In one photograph of a boxer named Bobby Sabu, dated 1954, Van Der Zee goes as far as erasing the background entirely. The photograph invites us to recontextualize the Black erasure and its relationship to Black subjectivity. Besides the boxing ring's ropes, which Van Der Zee seems to have drawn on himself after the photo's development, Sabu stands alone in a posture of proud defiance. Yet the ropes complicate Sabu's defiance. They remind us that Sabu is, to borrow from the language of photography, captured there. We know he is in a boxing ring because that's where boxers go. He'd become less of a boxer without the gloves, the boots, and the ropes that keep him there and not in the parking lot. Assuming the ropes were added late in the photo's development—a common trick of Stieglitz's photo secessionist movement—Van Der Zee asks whether the boxer or the ring came first. The answer is the boxer, of course, but his relation to the ring remains nevertheless fixed and total. The internment of Black subjectivity represented by the unreal ropes collapses around the real Sabu. He outruns his ropes.

Claudia Rankine, in *Citizen* (2014), recognizes a similar quality in Black internment. In a passage about Serena and Venus Williams, the lines of a tennis court become the ropes of a boxing ring, only displaced: "They win sometimes, they lose sometimes, they've been injured, they've been happy, they've been sad, ignored, booed mightily, they've been cheered, and through it all and evident to all were those people who are enraged they are there at all—graphite against a sharp white background" (ch. 2). Rankine's description of the Williams sisters applies equally to Lewis's representation of a boxing match. In his painting *Boxing at Juan-les-Pins* (1929), Lewis insists that the Black boxer is somehow safer in his ring—his cage—than outside of it, as if to say the real fight starts after the match is over and everyone has gone home (fig. 4). This is only a warm-up. For a community whose hypervisibility marks up America's "white background," lines—such as the ropes of a boxing ring, the service line of a tennis court, the imaginary racial borders that gerrymandering has carved through communities—become visible as well. Lines and borders mean a great deal to someone who is not supposed to be where they actually are. "Prison is not a place you enter," writes Rankine. "It is no place" (ch. 2). Du Bois's concept of the color line is no more a line than Rankine's prison. Yet it's there all the time. People die for it. They die because of it.

Just as the long line of a spiral coils down, it must inevitably unravel back out. While the spiral helps Lewis theorize the ways in which the global neighborhood had run peculiarity underground, Du Bois's spiral climbs up and out, uncoiling into a horizon of Black excellence; it expands and takes up white space. Tarr's observation that "we all are sicknesses for each other" is thus revised. In "The Exhibit of American Negroes," Du Bois proves community

can still be reparative against a system of racial subordination that results in an unequal distribution of capital and land (Morris 2018, 21, 23). In Du Bois's portraits, Black Americans have purchasing power. They work many of the same jobs white workers do. More than any of the other portraits, this fact—as well as the striking spiral employed to represent it—posed the greatest challenge to the insulated safety of white middle-class life. Shawn Michelle Smith writes that Du Bois hoped to destabilize the images of "negro criminality" that worked to "consolidate a vision of white middle-class privilege at the turn of the century" (2000, 583). "The Exhibit of American Negroes" illustrated the absolute political necessity of shaking "a racialized class warfare" that the perceived criminality of the black body came to represent in the prejudicial vision of middle-class white America. "Du Bois explicitly challenged dominant and extreme white perceptions of 'negro criminality,'" writes Smith, "particularly the tenets that 'the negro element is the most criminal in our population'" and that "the negro is much more criminal as a free man than he was as a slave" (583).

The effectiveness of Du Bois's visualization of Black homeownership is twofold. It is one compelling way to illustrate a shared, normative value system. Yet, Black homeownership also posed a significant threat to middle-class privilege, because those homes inevitably took up space—white space. Du Bois's data map of where Black Americans call home—another spiral—challenged the insulation of white middle-class life. The spiral uncoils as Black Americans move out of the country, culminating in a hooklike figure, as though the whole graph swung on a kind of pendulum, swinging. Read alongside the last spiral, the facts of Black upward mobility emerge: Black Americans have moved to the city; they own property in white spaces. President Trump's appeal to white Americans to let him save the suburbs gestures toward a familiar anxiety in white America. "Would you like a nice low-income housing project next to your suburban beautiful ranch style house? I saved your suburbs" (Reston 2020). The fact of Black purchasing power and homeownership, to appropriate Lewis's language, blasts the hermeticism of white spaces. The Black Vorticist proclaims, with Frantz Fanon, their right to exist, to walk easily over the color line and back: "Get used to me," they say, "I am not getting used to anyone" (Fanon 2008, ch. 5).

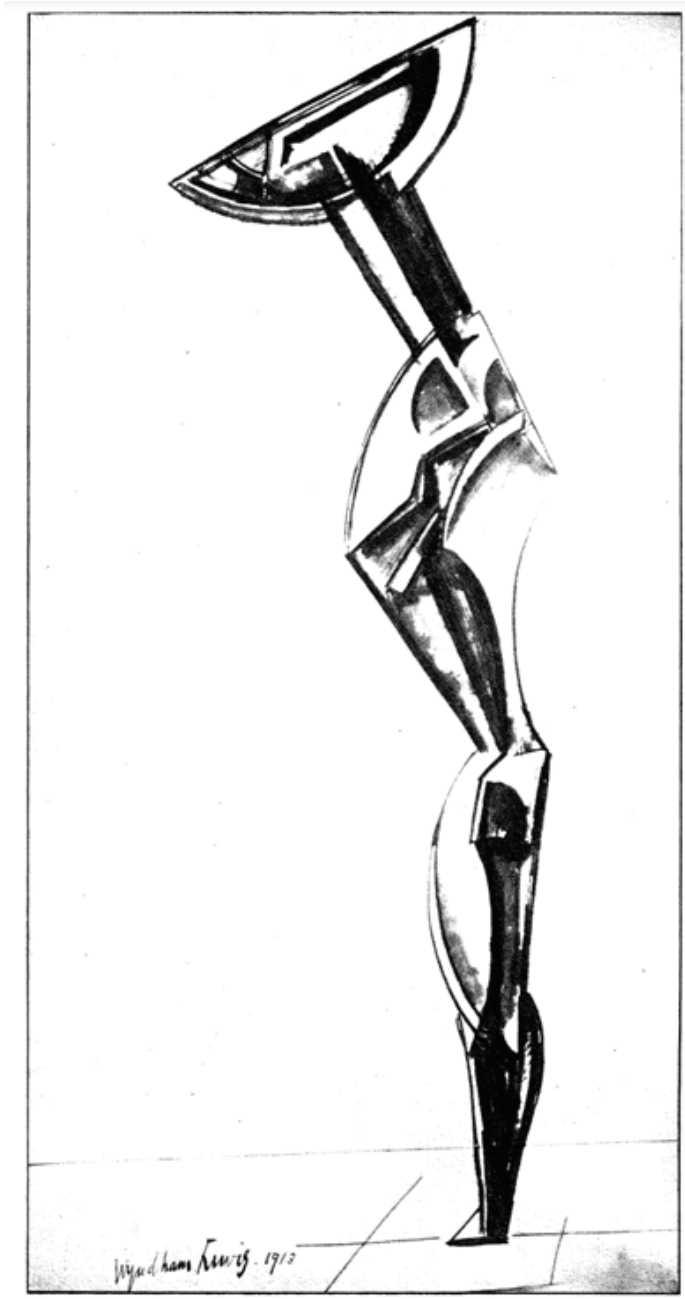

Fig. 1. Wyndham Lewis, *The Enemy of the Stars*, 1913, in BLAST 1 (1914), edited by Wyndham Lewis (Santa Barbara: Black Sparrow Press, 1981).

Fig. 2. Wyndham Lewis, *A Reading of Ovid*, 1921, oil on canvas, in Walter Michel, *Wyndham Lewis: Paintings and Drawings* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1971).

Fig. 3. Wyndham Lewis, *Mr Wyndham Lewis as 'Tyro'*, 1921, oil on canvas, in Walter Michel, *Wyndham Lewis: Paintings and Drawings* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1971).

Fig. 4. Wyndham Lewis, *Boxing at Juan-les-Pins*, 1929, watercolor and gouache over pencil and ink, in Walter Michel, *Wyndham Lewis: Paintings and Drawings* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1971).

Endnotes

1 We know that Lewis's familiarity with DuBois extended at least to a reading of the latter's novel Dark Princess (1928), which is discussed in Paleface (1929) in relation to a reference to Vorticism made by one of the novel's characters. Many thanks to Paul Edwards for directing my attention to this.

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