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7 Park Blues

Langston Hughes, Racial Exclusion, and the Park Ballad

Margaret Konkol

Synonymous with leisure and recreation, “park” evokes images of well-maintained plantings and open green spaces. “Park” is also metonymically associated with luxury. New York City’s Park Avenue which runs north to south, parallel to Madison Avenue, from the Harlem River to 32nd Street, is an iconic example of the inflation effect that an urban nature oasis—with fresh, clean air, and pleasant, restful prospects—has on real estate value. Central Park, the avenue’s antecedent, around which live the wealthy of New York, similarly displays this connection between green space and money. This is no accident. Susan Blackmur and Roy Rosenzweig describe the creation of Central Park as impelled as much by altruistic ideas about public amenities designed to raise the cosmopolitan stature of the city as by landowners wishing to enhance real estate values.¹ Park Avenue, lined as it is with expensive commercial real estate and the residences of billionaires, was once humble Fourth Avenue.² As Fourth Avenue, it was a motley assortment of tenements, warehouses, and livestock yards flanking a rail line owned and operated by Cornelius Vanderbilt. In 1870, at the behest of neighborhood advocates, Vanderbilt built tunnels for the New York and Harlem Rail tracks, creating two levels of platforms, and, above them, the city created its first linear park.

Extending three miles, from 34th to 40th avenue, the park blocks included a broad pedestrian path. Circular openings dispersed intermittently along the center of the path allowed light and air to reach the tracks below. Around these openings and along the sides of the path, blooms, greenery, and bench seating instilled the sense of a genteel pleasure garden. With the sound of trains reduced to a faint underground hum, Park Avenue earned a reputation as a peaceful respite from gilded age industry and traffic. In 1927, the park blocks were diminished by a road-widening campaign, but the park-like atmosphere was preserved. In actuality, Park Avenue extended for ten miles. Above 97th street, Park Avenue had no parkway and retained its utilitarian features and depressed property values. This portion of the avenue never had a park retrofit. In 1933, the affluent portion of Park Avenue represented a stark contrast to most of New York City, as well as to the rest of the nation, which was staggering under the financial collapse of the stock market.

In the wake of the crash, one in three New Yorkers was out of work, and Central Park's reservoir, which had been drained in 1929, hosted a Hooverville—an assemblage of makeshift dwellings constructed by New Yorkers experiencing homelessness.³ American parks had transformed into theaters that staged dramatic income inequalities.

Langston Hughes's "Park Bench," published in the radical periodical *The Anvil*, set in the linear park blocks of Park Avenue, channels the conventions of direct address characteristic of the era's language of leftist protest while also playing upon the folkloric verbal twists of the trickster figure to stage in its poles of address the class antagonism of the rich and the poor. The poem's speaker apostrophizes from a park bench, drawing attention to it as the confrontational site of spatially administered inequality. Critics have tended to read the poem as an example of Hughes's proletarian literature phase, a phase marked by its vision of a "raceless America" united by class interest.⁴ Hughes's short lyric documents the complex tensions rife in 1930s New York City. But it is not simply an expression of depression-era class-consciousness. It is a poem that joins with a number of strategic efforts by which African Americans challenged nature apartheid. This essay contextualizes "Park Bench" as a spatial race critique—one form of protest in a constellation of black activist work of the 1910s through 1950s that sought to address the customary and statutory exclusion of black Americans from parks, playgrounds, pools, and beaches. During the modernist period, these urban nature recreation sites, which had been established under the auspices of American democratic ideals, acted as exclusionary zones. America's green inheritance—diminished by cultural forces that designated parkland as not green so much as white or black space—is imprinted with a largely unreconciled history of segregation. Recent historical studies like that of Victoria Wolcott's work on the segregation of United States recreation spaces and William O'Brien's study of the state park system under Jim Crow serve as crucial forerunners to this chapter, a chapter that is concerned with the ways in which parkland as an idea circulated in a milieu of black intellectual and activist poets and scholars.⁵

The Rise of Urban Nature Recreation

Despite the democratic rhetoric of recreating nature for the people, in reality, national parks, state parks, and municipal parks were not built for everyone. In early twentieth-century America, the park was a particularly contested site. The pages of *The Crisis* and *Opportunity* lament the restrictions placed on the access black Americans had to public parks. An editorial in *The Crisis* records

That Negroes are denied access to public parks in some cities of the South is a matter of common note. New Orleans has numerous

playgrounds, but colored children may not enjoy them. Colored workmen passing through a park must not sit upon a bench, and colored mothers may not take their little children with them and play and rest under the city's trees in its attractive pleasure grounds. ("Concerning Parks" 28)

The commentator continues by describing how, elsewhere in the South, "In Memphis, Tennessee, the city's largest park is practically closed to Negroes. Only the boldest spirit dare enter, and then expulsion is almost certain" (28). Southern playgrounds were also segregated. Nannies could take their white charges to the park, but rest and contemplation on a park bench, the significant element of park furniture that enables this activity, was prohibited. Demonstrating the ubiquity of segregation, the NAACP reported in 1912 that "We find Jim Crow cars; we find laws prohibiting negro men and women entering public libraries, museums, parks and theatres" ("Holmes on Lynching" 109). Against the backdrop of this spatialized racism, in 1913, W. E. B. DuBois and W. E. Burghardt made an impassioned plea for public parks:

Imagine what it must mean to [. . .] live in a city hotter than New York without the privilege of breathing the free and fresh air of a Central Park! Such is the condition of the colored people of Memphis, but we fear that this appeal [. . .] will fall on the frozen hearts of a Southern city council: 'The Negroes now have no public park and no public place of amusement.' ("Give Them a Park" 180)

According to the limits of Jim Crow, the editors advocate for a park as it is "conducive to health" and commerce since "the Negro is the great wealth producer in this territory." Besides health and economic prosperity for all, DuBois and Burghardt add to their appeal to the Memphis city government that a park should be established on the basis that access to nature is a civil, human right:

The Negro, then, ought to have a park, and he should have reasonably convenient means of access to that park. 'There is a higher cause than that of commercial prosperity for a Negro recreation park. It is a part of humanity to give to the Negroes opportunity for innocent amusement.'

DuBois and Burghardt argue that a person should be able to live and work in proximity to a park. This last point is significant since, in the 1930s, the state park system assumed a mission to create state parks across America. In 1921, the National Conference on State Parks boasted that the state parks service would provide "a state park every 100 miles" (O'Brien 5). In the South, which segregated state parks by race, such

provisions for black Americans were, as O'Brien notes, too frequently patently ignored.

Nature apartheid was far worse in the South than in the North. Despite the fact that in northern cities, like New York, segregation was not legal, the geographic location of parks in all-black or all-white neighborhoods effectively created separate facilities. There were few parks or pools in Harlem—little opportunity for gaining the benefits of nature contemplation. In the same 1913 issue of *The Crisis*, The Urban League recorded that “Harlem’s large population of Negroes is without a playground for the children” (“Along the Color Line” 165). Nature recreation segregation, whether implicit and informal or institutionally codified, enacted social control, organizing people by race and economic bracket. By the 1920s, the city had spread out into the far corners of Manhattan, leaving only small pockets of land undeveloped. As a consequence, the scale of green space development shifted from creating large pastoral parks and grand boulevards, in the style of Olmsted and Vaux, to carving out small neighborhood reform parks equipped with recreation facilities. Since reform parks could not exactly aspire to recreate the feeling of the Adirondacks (Olmsted, in fact, designed parts of Central Park to evoke rugged upstate New York), urban planners and landscape architects instead focused on designing these small-scale parks for maximal recreational use. Rather than greenswards, parks included structures like playgrounds and tennis courts. This reform park movement in New York was part of a broader movement toward outdoor, nature recreation in the 1920s.⁶ Between 1920 and 1929, collectively, American cities created 2,261 new horseshoe courts, 1,817 handball courts, and 805 game fields. However, Harlem was largely neglected as a zone for installing such outdoor amenities, particularly during the WPA push to put the unemployed to work building new parkscapes or updating old ones. Even though The New Deal had funded the construction of hundreds of new outdoor recreation spaces, most of these were off limits to African Americans. This was particularly galling as construction was paid for out of tax revenue. Recreation, whether it took a rationalized manifestation like that of an amusement park or whether it was constructed as a pleasure garden, was largely denied to African Americans. By 1937, the WPA had undertaken 12,300 projects at a cost of \$1.5 billion dollars. Of those projects, 1/7 of those were erected in New York City. But, as Sandra Gaster remarks, “Negro Harlem [. . .] was punitively ignored” (“Children’s Access to U.S. Cities” 30).

The ways in which both these small-scale parks and the larger park amenities of locations like Central Park and Prospect Park were regulated also performed ongoing racial distinctions that continued to disenfranchise black park-goers. Park regulations, newspaper announcements of baseball games, meetings of women’s clubs, and social events held in parks, as well as reports of crime and violence, provide evidence that

urban parks practiced, as Galen Cranz puts it, “an elaborate system of public etiquette to maintain racial deference.” Throughout the pages of *The Crisis* and *Opportunity*, editorials call out American cities for the restrictions placed on black Americans’ access to public parks. This denial of nature space stemmed from attitudes that classified black Americans as inherently of nature, rather than of culture. If black Americans were seen as part of nature, what need, so the argument ran, would they have to reconnect with nature? Park apartheid was one aspect of a cluster of policies that denied equal rights and equal opportunity.

In addition to *The Crisis* and *Opportunity*, *The Chicago Defender* was a prominent forum for strategizing the fight against racial injustice. A contributing writer to the *Defender*, Hughes published numerous poems and essays in its pages between 1941 and 1961. His 1942 op-ed, “Klan or Gestapo,” warns readers that fellow black writers must speak out in support of World War II war efforts. Attainment of international democracy would lead to full democracy at home. Hughes explains that Jim Crow is “part of the problem of world freedom everywhere.” He draws an analogy: “Imperialism does not run by color. Korea under Japan had a kind of Asiatic Jim Crow. Imperialism everywhere dies hard.” It is therefore “the duty of Negro writers to point out that it is an error to think of World War II in terms of race” and therefore discount it as of little relevance. Hughes puts it succinctly: “our local fascists are blood brothers of the Japanese—though they speak with a Dixie drawl”; therefore, “we must join hands with the crushed common people of Europe, the Soviet Union, the Chinese, and unite our efforts—else we who are negroes will have not only the Klan at our necks in intensified fashion, but the Gestapo as well” (“Klan or Gestapo” 12). Such internationalism or sense of race interests subsumed by class interest articulates a Marxist call for international worker solidarity. Hughes and other antifascist black writers realized that a class analysis was needed, not just a racial analysis.

Economic disparities become a more explicit trope in Hughes’s poetry of the 1930s. In “My Adventures as a Social Poet,” Hughes recalls the discomfort his political poetry had on early patrons and readers as well as “feeling the great gulf between the very poor and the very rich” as he traveled from “hungry Harlem to the lovely homes on Park Avenue” (205–12). Recalling the reception of “Advertisement for the Waldorf-Astoria” and “Park Bench,” he laconically remarks that his poetic barbs meant that “in a little while I did not have a patron anymore.” “Advertisement for the Waldorf-Astoria” published in *New Masses* in December 1931 is a critique of conspicuous consumption and bourgeois indifference to depression-era poverty and suffering. Using collage technique, Hughes lifts copy from an advertisement for the luxury hotel announcing its grand opening: “Fine living . . . à la carte?? / Come to the Waldorf-Astoria” (321). To emphasize the elite New York hotel, the poem uses the

proper name “Waldorf-Astoria.” But while the advertisement is intended to address an aristocratic class by appealing to their vanities and appetites, the poem appropriates the ad copy, exposing its blandishments by resituating the language in a poem that addresses the masses. Scornfully enumerating the hotel amenities, the speaker explains, “So when you’ve no place else to go, homeless and hungry / ones, choose the Waldorf as a background for your rags” (321). Addressing “hungry ones,” “roomers,” “evicted families,” and “negroes,” before broadening its scope to include “everybody,” the poem dwells on the disparity between those who can afford to pay for a night of luxury and those whose only home is a transient makeshift shelter, assembled nightly: “All you families put out in the street,” “kids homeless,” and those “colored folks, hungry a long time in 135th Street,” who are outside, “cold as hell / on Lenox Avenue” (321–3). Hughes exhorts Harlemites to head downtown and “Give Park Avenue a / lot of darkie color—free for nothing” (322). The poem then specifies that the Waldorf-Astoria is located on “49th Street at Park Avenue” (323). Blending aesthetics and action, lending the poem the quality of a protest poem, the speaker volunteers the Waldorf’s cross streets, and repeats “Park Avenue” twice as if to emphasize that wealth is a geographically visible, mappable phenomenon. As if in response to the playful, confrontational recommendation that “Waldorf” offers, “Park Bench” delivers just such a scenario—as someone, perhaps a down-and-out Harlemite, heads downtown.

Until the 1990s, Hughes’s proletarian poetry, as well as the rest of his 1930s political writing, was largely regarded as incommensurate with his experimental black persona poems of the 1920s. Published in the first issue of *The Anvil: Stories for Workers*, the newest iteration of editor Jack Conroy’s *Rebel Poet*, “Park Bench” appeared alongside Hughes’s “Ballads of Lenin” as well as work by past *Rebel Poet* authors Walter Snow, Jack Balch, and H. H. Lewis. The polyvocal “Ballads” presents three workers’ voices: Ivan, Chico, and Chan, who identify as peasant, negro, and foundry worker. The voices are interwoven with a refrain that apostrophizes to “Comrade Lenin of Russia.” Exemplifying this assessment, another poem of this period, “One More S in the USA,” appeals to workers united by class allegiance. It is true that, to a certain extent, in “One More S,” racial identity is effaced. However, while the speaker’s voice may be racially opaque, the speaker also states that the interests of the races must come together in the struggle to establish a Communist state: “Black and white can all be red.” So too, “Ballads,” which was published in *The Anvil*, alongside “Park Bench,” articulates, as James Smethurst notes, a Pan-African international communism.⁷

Readers of *The Anvil* would have recognized Hughes’s contribution of “Park Bench” as a class-inflected analysis of racial inequity.⁸ While “Ballads” ventriloquizes the voices of three racialized figures, the racial identity of the speaker of “Park Bench” is ambiguous. In the early

twentieth century, there was heightened national attention to language use—from coarse-grained nativism (which advocated the institution of a single official national language) to run-of-the-mill classist intolerance for nonstandard linguistic signatures (which translated to pronunciation lessons in public schools). Of the latter, pronunciation of English and adherence to grammatical sentence construction patterns indicated, as Joshua Miller has written, “normative whiteness.” Deviation in accent or form from normative, standard (white) English represented ethnic, racial, and class provinciality—an inability to access the right Americanness. As with Hughes’s blues poetry, which follows an AAB rhyme scheme, adapting an oral/aural form for the page, Hughes’s proletarian poetry is marked by similar combinations of enjambment and end-stopped lines that mimic spoken language in ways that resist these attempts at linguistic norms. Using the ballad stanza, “Park Bench,” like “Ballads of Lenin,” uses accessible vocabulary and direct address. Composed of five sentences distributed over three quatrains—xaxa, xbx, xaxa—that produce an irregular trochaic meter, and propelled by light enjambment, the effect is of vernacular speech funneled into the folk stanza:

I live on a park bench.
 You, Park Avenue
 Hell of a distance,
 Between us two.
 I beg a dime for dinner—
 You got a butler and a maid.
 But I’m wakin’ up.

Contractions (“wakin’), nonstandard use of the verb ‘to be’ (“You got” rather than “You have”) and a curse (“Hell”), signal vernacular speech. Elsewhere, Hughes employs diacritical marks and phonetic spelling (d’ for t) to indicate rural, black, southern speech forms. Among black poets, there were differing opinions about the value of writing in dialect. Zora Neale Hurston, Jean Toomer, and Hughes made use of it more frequently than James Weldon Johnston, but by the 1930s, Hughes could be found invoking African American Vernacular English (AAVE), strategically, rather than universally.

A persistent interest in African American voice continued to inform Hughes’s poetry of the 1930s, leading to poetry written for two distinct audiences: an urban black intelligentsia and a rural African American audience. Smethurst describes the Hughesian typical “working-class speaker whose diction derives as much from pulp fiction and the movies as from any actually spoken English [which is as common as his use of] an African-American voice [which frequently] erupts from within the address of the ‘hard-boiled’ speaker” (110). In “Park Bench,” Hughes

does not employ the dental consonant “d” but he does make use of diacritical marks. Since cities like New York absorbed African Americans and immigrants from all over the world, regional idioms and accented American (to borrow a phrase from Miller) blended in new amalgamations.⁹ Reflecting the fact that an African American from New York did not speak the same idioms nor with the same inflections as an African American from rural Georgia, “Park Bench” emphasizes colloquial, oral speech patterns rather than explicitly coded AAVE. The speaker employs vernacular, but codes it as urban, rather than rural. Additionally, Hughes’s cultural prominence meant that a poem bearing his authorial signature automatically links with the body of work that has proceeded it—literature and poetry that explore black experience. In other words, the authorial signature of Langston Hughes underwrites the speaker as black, but the syntax of the poem effaces distinct racial linguistic marks.

While the poem collapses distinctions between race and class, it differentiates between physical, found space and active place-making. The poem begins with an assertion of belonging: “I live on a park bench.” The end-stopped line underscores the confidence of the assertion. A person sits on a park bench, rests on a park bench, eats lunch on a park bench, but a bench is not a felicitous place to make one’s home. The next line interpolates an unidentified fellow park-goer who, by strolling Park Avenue, is likely one of the white bourgeoisie making his way to the Waldorf-Astoria: “You, Park Avenue.” The opening lines establish a geo-economic, mappable gulf between “I” and a “you.” The second line’s internal rhyme “you/avenue” establishes the rightness of fit between “you” and the place “you” are from. The line break divides “Park Avenue” and “Hell” enabling “hell” to work as an interjection as well as a proximal deictic—as a topos, a place, beneath Park Avenue:

Hell of a distance,
Between us two.

In Manhattan, economic status plots partially to the vertical axis. The high-rise apartment-dwelling Park Avenue resident is in a comparative heaven compared to the hellish conditions of impoverished street life.

Hughes’s poem, therefore, maps a race and class inequality that is codified in metropolitan space. As sociologists Horace Cayton and St. Clair Drake demonstrated in *Black Metropolis* (a major full-scale sociological analysis of the relationship between race and urban space), the neat dividing lines of 1920s municipal residential maps that indicate ethnic divisions within neighborhoods are not indicative of natural social growth patterns so much as the product of restrictive covenants and red-lining practices which limited African American settlement. The borders of black Harlem in 1920, 1925, and 1930 as depicted at the Digital Harlem project vividly demonstrate the effect of the Great Migration and the

scale of growth of New York's African American community (<http://digitalharlem.org/>). In 1920, Harlem abutted Park Avenue between the blocks of 130th and 135th streets. The neighborhood was of mixed racial composition closest to the top of Central Park, Morningside Park, and what would become Harlem River Park and Marcus Garvey Park. By 1930, Harlem extended an additional four blocks to 126th Street and included British West Indian, Danish West Indian, Puerto Rican, African, South American, and Northern and Southern African Americans. However, even with the expansion of Harlem, African Americans continued to feel the pressure of informal social and economic forces driving their decisions of where to settle in Manhattan. Situating her study within geographical theory and ethnographic method, Jean Alger argues that Hughes's 1920s blues poetry "craft[s] a black identity dependent on movement, either physical movement from one place to another, or spiritual movement as a result of imagination and the rhythms of jazz, blues, and ragtime" (139). The Harlem of Hughes's poetry is not, as Alger observes, a "black haven" or discrete space free of the Jim Crow South. Rather, the poems represent Harlem as crisscrossed by white interests (such as the exoticization of Harlem nightlife) and haunted by Southern and Northern racism.

Establishing mobility—the freedom to migrate—is, therefore, a significant assertion of agency for Hughes's speakers, a kind of mobility the speaker playfully asserts at the poem's end:

Say, you ain't afraid
 That I might just maybe
 In a year or two,
 Move this park bench over
 To Park Avenue?

The speaker of "Park Bench" threatens to invade affluent white-encoded space. This white-encoded space was policed in part through architecture and the unsanctioned practices of corporate real estate. While Park Avenue runs through Harlem, the character of the street is architecturally distinct from the white bourgeois space of Park Avenue proper. In her memoir about growing up as an upper-middle-class Jew on New York's east side, Annie Roiphe recalls,

Standing on the overpass on 97th Street you could look back at Park Avenue or ahead to the tilting fire escape laced four-story, laundry-flapping, cabbage-smelling buildings that pressed against the stone walls that lifted the tracks into the sky. The overpass was a line drawn in cement. It marked the formal end of Park Avenue and the true beginning of Harlem. The children from Park Avenue knew never to cross that line. (Roiphe)

While red lining created a racially segregated cityscape which spatially organized black, white, and immigrant communities, the figure of the bum, with no domicile, beyond the infiltrating gaze of the census, dwells beyond such forms of control. But Hughes's park bench speaker is not ashamed. Pronouncing "I live on a park bench" without a crisis of identity, the "Park Bench" speaker playfully extends a modernist fascination with the figure of the tramp, in either his iterations as the rail-traveling hobo or the city-bound bum. In contemporary usage, "homeless" refers to those who are jobless and who cannot afford lodging. For modernists, another term operated alongside "homeless." While "homeless" was closely linked with bad fortune—good citizens brought low by hard times—with those who had lost their home in the depression, bum and hobo identities were seen as often acquired by choice.¹⁰ According to capitalist logic, the bum's presence, as lived and embodied, is a remainder—something left over in the economic equation. Untethered to work responsibilities or an address to call home, the bum troubles the meanings of exchange value as he exists outside of labor, production, and capital. Proletarian experience is defined by being not of the property or land-owning class—of having only one's labor as surplus. In the poem's Marxist race analysis, the bum is not "homeless" so much as landless. Unencumbered by elaborate social etiquette, the perspicacious tramp-speaker is able to reflect on his own condition, one shared with increasing numbers of fellow New Yorkers. In 1933, a significant number of New Yorkers could no longer pay rent or meet their mortgage payments. Wealth—epitomized by Park Avenue opulence, exists by way of systemic, slow violence. The relation of criticism to its object in "Park Bench" meets in the poem's eponymously named object. As object, the park bench establishes liminal space. As Vito Acconci much more recently rhapsodizes, a "public space, on a city plan, is an in-between place" in which "no person owns a place within the public space: it is a conglomerate of private spaces" maintained by the fact that "you can keep your place, as long as you keep to your place" (24, 33). The park and its benches are located in public space, but the social and cultural mores that govern the role of the bench itself designate it as a space of privacy. The park bench and Park Avenue, a street of affluence, imagined, in its name, as a park, inaccessible to all but a few, but observable to all, suspend that violence by way of spatial discipline. The tramp and the stroller alike have access to the park and, within limits, the park bench enables a temporary occupation of space.

New York's Central Park, within a few blocks of Harlem, was originally designed for didactic social class interaction. These nineteenth-century parks were landscaped to afford views of vistas which produced a sense of freedom and the limitlessness of nature, though, of course, there were explicit and implicit rules about how to utilize park space. By providing space and time for contemplation and relaxation, city

planners conceived of the city park as a respite from the workday. The speaker has taken his rest on a park bench, interrupting the genteel scene of fabricated, pastoral comity. Importantly, the poem makes no mention of the plants and scenery. The simplicity of the scene—a speaker, an addressee, and a park bench—emphasizes that the space, and any nature it may contain, is first and foremost a culturally determined space. The homeless figure dwells in the park without having followed the diurnal patterns of other city dwellers who map the city according to work and recreation. Notably, nineteenth-century park theory imagined that cross-class interactions would expose the working class and poor to the manners and affability of the wealthy, thus teaching by example. Spectacle was intended to occur in one direction only from aristocrat to proletariat. But, in “Park Bench,” the direction of address reverses as the speaker schools the addressee. The speaker ostensibly calls out to a white bourgeois audience and teasingly compares each other’s relative fortunes:

I beg a dime for dinner—
 You got a butler and a maid.
 But I’m wakin’ up.
 Say, you ain’t afraid

The lyric’s speaker is half-way between disenfranchised trickster persona and a member of a mobilized insurgency. The lyric’s representative voice positions “I” as speaking for “us.” Smethurst notes that “undervaluation of Hughes’s revolutionary poetry misses the sly voice inhabiting the poems. This voice usually means what it says, but never quite says all that it means in a straightforward way” (102). Likewise, the singular lyric voice of “Park Bench” doubles as the expression of the masses. Hailing the Park Avenue resident as “you” reverses the expected top-down observational position of lyric address. Imbued with class-consciousness (“I’m waking up”) but resisting open confrontation by assuming a playfully imploring voice, the speaker articulates acquisitive hunger for the luxury of possessing a “butler and a maid,” but undercuts the threat he has posed, by reminding the Park Avenue type that he has just been begging “a dime for dinner.” The challenge the figure poses to the established order—that he might set up a home on Park Avenue—is partially effaced through linguistic hedging: “I might just maybe” move “this park bench over,” a rhetorical strategy associated with Anansi, a Caribbean and West African folk trickster figure who, through language play, undoes powerful adversaries:

That I might just maybe
 In a year or two,
 Move this park bench over
 To Park Avenue?

More radical than a single fugitive vagrant/homeless figure who trespasses on private residential property, the lyric recasts tramping as a permanent mass class-race-movement upward. Class mobility literally would be visible between 1920 and 1930 in the black population's spatial redistribution/expansion in New York City. The lyric thus threatens the status quo with the prospect of black America's upward mobility, of crossing the red line and tramping into uptown's own backyards. The speaker will remain essentially unchanged (still black/landless); he will "move this park bench over," which is to say, he proposes that he will integrate without forfeiting identity. Whitewashing, he informs his interlocutor, will not be the bar to entry as a Park Avenue resident. "Park Bench" challenges the practices of recreational segregation and of neighborhood red lining as it establishes the park as a confrontational staging ground for a more permanent racial and economic integration. This confrontation between black and white takes place in the green. Notably, the poem is not the expression of an aspiration for bourgeois white assimilation, while it teasingly transgresses into white, leisure-class space.

"No, I am an American": Park Benches and Protests

American black political thought in the 1930s and 1940s, as Davarian Baldwin writes, made "connections between workers of the world and the international Americanness of the Black experience" (429). For instance, during World War II, when Hughes called for support of the war effort, he was advancing what was known as the Double Victory Program. This program sought domestic equality, i.e. an end to Jim Crow at home, and international democracy, i.e. an end to fascism abroad. Hughes's communist allegiances brought him into dialogue with other black intellectuals who were engaged in the analysis of metropolitan race conditions. Indeed, during this era, urban sociology and literary modernism were collaboratively intertwined. Sociologist Horace Cayton, who was friends with Hughes, Richard Wright, and others, records a visit to Germany in which he draws an analogous relationship between fascism and Jim Crow staged in public green space. Notably, like "Park Bench," in his memoir *Long Old Road*, Cayton illustrates the savagery of segregation through a description of a confrontational scene that unfolds on a park bench:

We stopped overnight in Hamburg [. . .]. I went out for a walk that afternoon and after a while I sat down on a bench in a little park to rest [. . .]. I had been sitting there only a few minutes before a policeman approached and spoke to me in German. I explained, both in English and in German, that I could not understand him. He looked puzzled for a moment and then walked over to another bench and returned with a civilian. (229)

Like the speaker of “Park Bench,” Cayton characterizes himself as Anansi-like—outwitting the Nazi officer, explaining in German that he does not understand the German language. Also, like Hughes’s poem, Cayton’s anecdote emphasizes that caste and cultural capital follows from the use of standard English: “‘The officer wants to know if you are a Jew,’ the civilian explained in broken English. ‘No, I am an American.’” (230). The characterization of the German civilian’s English as “broken” conveys two things. First, it situates English as a marker of cosmopolitan identity. Cayton’s internationalism—he can speak both German and English fluently—indicates his stature and mobility. This pointedly reverses caste by recasting the African American Cayton as more worldly than the white Nazi. After all, the Nazi officer knows only German. The German officer is thus racialized in ways that non-standard English spoken in the US marked out a speaker as provincial, nonwhite, and not a natural American. Second, describing the question as posed in “broken English,” thus emphasizing the immense effort it takes the civilian and the Nazi officer to communicate racial chauvinism (the civilian is complicit), conveys the narrowness of their attitudes. Cayton is a modern man, a citizen of modernity. And, like Anansi, Cayton undoes his opponents with sly word play and riddles: “No, I am an American” (230). Cayton describes the effect his answer has on the pair: “There was a conference between the two of them, and again the civilian addressed me, ‘If you are not a Jew you don’t have to sit on this bench. It is for Jews only’” (230). Significantly, Cayton has discovered that the Germans hate German Jewish people more than Americans who are black. The governing paradigm of US racial hierarchy holds no currency in Nazi Germany. Cayton makes this point in order to demonstrate the arbitrariness of American prejudice.

Cayton responds by probing the parallels between American Jim Crow segregation laws of public parks and German nature apartheid:

“I like it here,” I replied. “Is there any law that says I can’t sit here?”

They were both bewildered, and there was another conference, this one much longer. Once more the civilian returned.

“The officer says you can sit here if you wish, but it is for Jews. He doesn’t understand why you would wish to remain where Jews sit.”

Cayton recalls that he did not reply. What follows is his reflection on the exchange:

[A]fter a few moments of silence they both walked away. I had, of course, heard of the persecution of the Jews, but this was the first time I had actually encountered it. It seemed to me even sillier than Mississippi, where discrimination was at least based on color differences. Here they couldn’t even be sure what a Jew looked like.

Then I began to wonder why I had refused to move. It might have been serious, had the officer decided to be tough about it.

In the South, white supremacy pitted one minority against another. This leads Cayton to connect and contrast the experiences:

Jews down south who had accepted the southern way of life, sometimes becoming even more vicious in their racial prejudice than white, gentile southerners. Why should I stick my neck out for such Jews, I thought; after all, they are white. But I realized my behavior had been a broad gesture of protest against prejudice in any form; whether some Jews in the United States accepted racism or not had nothing to do with it. In defiance I spent an uncomfortable half-hour sitting out my protest. (*Long Old Road* 229–30).

Cayton recognizes the pivotal nature of this interaction. The scene depicts the indecipherability for Cayton of German green space. While “colored” public parks were less well-maintained or otherwise marked out for easy identification with written labels, Cayton has somehow neither perceived the inferiority of this park bench nor decoded the signifiers used in German public parks. Since the exchange has taken place in a public park, the dialogue is elevated to political speech. The exchange hinges on the right to occupy public nature. As Cayton jocularly concludes, he spent “an uncomfortable half-hour sitting out my protest” (230). But the intent is serious: speech is political, and occupying a park bench is a political act. The presence of a black body on a park bench is thereby defined as protest.

Stateside, a similar park bench protest ended brutally. In 1942, Albert T. Luster, protesting the Jim Crow segregation of Cleveland’s Euclid Beach Park, sat down on a park bench and refused to leave. According to reports, he said that “this place is getting worse than Nazi Germany” (qtd. in Wolcott). His statement demonstrates the commonplaceness of the connection between Jim Crow nature segregation and fascist German policies. The police were no help to Luster, aiding and abetting the violent white mob that attacked Luster and beat him severely. Other large northern cities were similarly organized along racist spatial exclusion zones. Violence erupted in Chicago in 1919 when a swimmer drifted across the imaginary line between white and black areas at a Chicago beach. Whitford recounts the events as “when a black teenager crossed an invisible boundary between the waters of the 29th Street beach, known to be reserved for whites, and the 25th Street beach, known to be reserved for blacks.” White bathers attacked the teenager. So too, in Buffalo, where nature recreation sites were not formally segregated, public parks became staging grounds for racial conflict. In 1956, a large-scale fight erupted at an amusement park between black and

white teenagers. As with New York, Buffalo's African American population had increased with the Great Migration, which meant that racial tensions escalated over the right to occupy physical public park space. Whitford explains that "parks provided neutral territory where [youths] could display physical prowess and racial allegiances" (145). Neither school nor workplace, the play space afforded by nature recreation sites enabled animosities to take full expression.

Hughes turns to a different kind of figure of the child-in-the-park in his bleak 1950 poem, "Kid in the Park," as the speaker contemplates an isolated child at rest on yet another park bench. This quiet lyric lacks the certitude or verbal play of "Park Bench" yet captures an even wider historical sense of displacement. The poem apostrophizes to a solitary child: "Lonely little question mark / on a bench in the park." Describing the child as "lonely" and the physiognomy as bent like a "little question mark," the child is fixed as an object of pathos. As if trying to bring a smile to the child's face or to distract her or him from inward cares, the poet points to the world around the child: "See the people passing by? / See the airplanes in the sky? / See the birds." But this line of distraction snares as it describes birds, "flying home / before / dark." This image of home-going evokes its opposite, summoning again the specter of the park tramp. The speaker of "Kid in the Park," like that of the speaker of "Park Bench," voices an experience of homelessness that expands beyond the present, taking wing over a tacit memory of the middle passage. The denial of a shared public urban nature is an expression of the exclusion of black Americans from full citizenship in nature's nation. The poem breaks off as it half-heartedly considers that "Home's just around / the corner / there— / *but not really / anywhere*" (376).

Being Black in the American Green

Undoubtedly, there is a dark side to modern green space. With no exception, parks, as part of the American landscape, are imprinted with racial history. Hughes's "Park Bench" and Cayton's memories of the segregated German park bench and Luster's claim on nature, via the liminal park bench, provide an image of the modernist green as a complex, historically defined social space. Just as the 1896 case of *Plessy v Ferguson* imposed legal segregation and *Brown v Board of Education* (1954) overturned the doctrine of separate but equal, two landmark cases in nature recreation history similarly determined access to public nature. In 1942, a golf player wished to play a round of golf on a public Baltimore course. He was denied entry. Since the city maintained four golf courses, but only permitted African Americans to use the nine-hole course, the plaintiff sued that access to recreation was not equal. Relying on *Plessy v Ferguson*, the court ruled in *Durkee v Murphy* (1942) that the Park Board had a right to deny the golfer entry. The court reasoned

that separate racial facilities kept order in the park system.¹¹ But, while *Durkee v Murphy* ruled in the favor of the Board of Park Commissioners to uphold segregation, by 1955, public opinion had evolved. *Boyer V Garret* (1955) disestablished the doctrine of separate but equal. In this case, two groups of plaintiffs sued the city of Baltimore when they were forcibly removed from Druid Hill Park basketball and tennis courts while attempting to play interracial team games and tennis matches. *Boyer v Garret* ruled that under Maryland law, the Park Board did not have the authority to segregate the races. This ruling set new park policy across the country and launched an uneven wave of desegregation of all recreational facilities in public parks, playgrounds, beaches, and public bathing houses. By 1955, Oklahoma, Maryland, West Virginia, and Kentucky joined northern states in providing an integrated state park system. A 1963 Supreme Court Case, *Watson v City of Memphis*, called for immediate desegregation of public parks—state and municipal—across the country. The history of desegregation is well documented as it took form in schools, public restrooms, restaurants, and buses, but parks have largely evaded this memorial investigation since the park is often regarded as an ahistorical place of uneventfulness. The cultivated nature it offers users is landscaped in such a way to obscure historical process—not to mention natural process. The park bench—common unremarkable element of park furniture—has served as a microsite of protest that helped to bring about these significant legal and spatial changes. The park bench itself is symbolic of leisure, looking, socializing, and the autonomy afforded a visitor to a public park, a subject position Hughes’s speakers reclaim.

In his memoir *The Big Sea*, Hughes recalls visiting Nashville, Tennessee, where he learned first-hand that the South had comprehensively extended its Jim Crow policies to all geographies—whether it was made of steel and stone or of grass:

If a park lay between you and your destination, you could not walk through the park as a white person might do. Being colored, you had to go around the park. I knew of course, that Negroes were compelled to use Jim Crow waiting rooms at railroad stations, and ride in the Jim Crow car next up to the engine. And I rather expected to see a lynching every day; but about such subtleties as parks, I was ignorant. (286)

This anecdote from *The Big Sea* and his blues ballad “Park Bench” are not outliers in Hughes’s oeuvre. Between the 1930s and 1950s, Hughes wrote a number of poems about park benches and “park benching”—a verb form of the compound noun that indicates the centrality of the park bench to modes of being and dwelling. The tense, playful, and melancholic ways in which “Park Bench” navigates themes of belonging

and displacement bespeak Hughes's extended interest in the hobo and tramp figure as a cosmopolitan modernist identity. The modernist public green makes these race and class encounters possible sites of dialogue. As Joshua Schuster has noted in his discussion of Hughes, the blues speaker, who is "exposed to the outdoors and the racially encoded landscape," resists the pastoralizing impulse (102). Likewise, the park in "Park Bench" is not an occasion for pastoral fantasy so much as it is a lyric stimulus for reflecting on possible better futures.

Notes

- 1 Blackmur and Rosenzweig explain that in nineteenth century New York City, parks and road improvements were financed through benefit assessments on adjacent landowners. The proponents of Central Park successfully lobbied for a general tax, lifting real estate speculator's financial burden but, in the process, they transformed the meaning of New York City's first great park. As a park funded by the people of the city, Central Park, from its inception, was a people's park.
- 2 Today, Park Avenue runs from 132nd Street to 32nd. Below 32nd it is called Park Avenue South. At 17th Street Park Avenue South wraps around Union Square. It bears that name briefly until it hits a jig in the grid and bifurcates into Broadway and Fourth Avenue.
- 3 In 1932, the US homeless population reached 1.2 million of which 2,000 were New Yorkers. See Roy Rosenzweig and Elizabeth Blackmur's *The Park and the People: A History of Central Park* (1992). According to the New York Tenement Museum "half of [the city's] manufacturing plants were closed, one in every three New Yorkers was unemployed, and roughly 1.6 million were on some form of relief" (quoted in Kuroski 8).
- 4 James Smethurst has called attention to the critical tendency to regard Hughes's 1930s revolutionary poetry published in leftist literary magazines as the expression of a "vision of an essentially raceless America" (110). Smethurst can be credited with first demonstrating the sophisticated ways in which Hughes never abandoned race as a critical category. See *The New Red Negro: The Literary Left and African American Poetry, 1930–1946* (1999).
- 5 See O'Brien's *Landscapes of Exclusion: State Parks and Jim Crow in the American South* (2015) and Wolcott's *Race, Riots, and Roller Coasters: the struggle over Segregated Recreation in America* (2012).
- 6 In 1924, the first Conference on Outdoor Recreation convened. In 1932, it expanded into an international conference. Between 1920 and 1929, personal expenditures for recreation increased nearly fivefold. Much of the money went for travel to resorts and to the purchase of equipment like skis, balls, fishing rods, and the like. Public expenditures rose as well.
- 7 See Smethurst 183.
- 8 For a history of *Anvil*, see Wixon. Hughes republished this poem in his collection *New Song* (1938), a volume funded by the International Workers Order. Subsequent assessment of Hughes overlooked this period of his poetry because of its formal simplicity and its paraphraseability.
- 9 See Joshua Miller's *Accented America: The Cultural Politics of Multilingual Modernism* (2011).
- 10 Carl Sandberg honed his poetry from a sojourn traveling the rails as a hobo. Likewise, Sherwood Anderson vividly described the diverse audiences at the

Dill Pickle Club in Chicago as a mix of the poet, the professor, “the literary critic, the earnest young wife, who hungers for culture, and the hobo” (Anderson). In this case, the presence of the hobo signifies a curious intellectual who is an aesthetically attuned audience member.

- 11 The Mayor and City Council of Baltimore were entrusted “to make such rules and regulations for the government and preservation of order within the parks as it may deem expedient” “Durkee v Murphy” (1942). Racial segregation was considered the means to avoiding racially charged conflict.

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