

ABSTRACT

Title of Document: RECLAIMING THE MODERN AMERICAN
BODY IN THE AGE OF THE MACHINE:
WILLIAM H. JOHNSON'S *JITTERBUGS* AND
THE ARTICULATION OF "HUMANIZED
MACHINE AESTHETICS"

Eowyn May McHenry, Master of Arts, 2008

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Since Richard Powell's decisive monograph on William H. Johnson was published in 1991, Johnson's vast body of work has been the focus of several exhibitions, catalogues, and scholarly articles. While his *Jitterbugs* series of prints, drawings, and paintings is mentioned in some of these studies, sustained and thorough attention has not yet been paid to this series. What has been written about *Jitterbugs* tends to offer a straightforward account of Johnson's depiction of the popular dance and the fashionable attire of the dancers while emphasizing his choice of this subject matter within the context of the Harlem Renaissance. A closer look at the *Jitterbugs* series, however, reveals affinities with modern caricature and machine age aesthetics that places Johnson's work within an expanded modernist discourse about the relationship between the human body and the machine, and the relationship between African American identity and the concept of "Americanness."

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"HUMANIZED MACHINE AESTHETICS"

By

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Introduction

In a recent examination of modernism, technology, and African American cultural forms in the swing era, cultural studies scholar Joel Dinerstein convincingly argues that African American musicians and dancers incorporated machine aesthetics into their expressive forms as a way to humanize the overwhelming mechanization of daily life, purge society's anxieties about technological unemployment and other machine age fears, and reinvigorate the modern American body.¹ For these performing artists, to assimilate machine aesthetics into their creative forms was to exercise a level of control over the growing mechanization of the modern world. Similarly, it can be argued that visual artists whose work incorporated machine aesthetics were attempting to give graphic form to machine age anxieties in order to master them. Since the human body is the “instrument” of dance, and music to a lesser degree, an assimilation of machine aesthetics into these performance arts and into the visual representation of them marked a re-evaluation of the relationship between the machine and the human body. According to Dinerstein, the integration of machine aesthetics—“power, speed, repetition, precision, efficiency, rhythmic flow”—into swing music and dance served to prioritize and revitalize the human body.² It is within the constellation of modernist concerns including machine age optimism, technological anxieties, and the re-imagining the modern American body that I will consider William H. Johnson's *Jitterbugs* series of 1940-1942 (Fig. 1-5) as an embodiment of *humanized* machine aesthetics.

¹ Joel Dinerstein, *Swinging the Machine: Modernity, Technology, and African American Culture between the World Wars* (Boston, Massachusetts: University of Massachusetts Press, 2003).

² Quote is from Dinerstein, 12. I am greatly indebted to Joel Dinerstein's analysis of the humanized machine aesthetics of big band jazz music and the Lindy hop. This assimilation of machine sounds and movements by African American performing artists in the interwar years forms the basis of my argument that Johnson incorporated visual elements of the machine into his *Jitterbugs* series. My thesis expands his analysis of the African American articulation of mechanization in music and dance to the realm of the visual arts.

I take five of Johnson's *Jitterbugs* paintings as a representative sample of the entire series. These five paintings were the centerpiece of Richard Powell's discussion of the *Jitterbugs* series in his important monograph and exhibition of the artist from 1991, and I follow Powell's lead in using these works to represent the series. They present the five topoi around which Johnson organized his series—five different jitterbug steps that will be discussed in detail later in this paper. During the three-year period that he worked on this series, Johnson produced over twenty works in oil, tempura, gouache, ink, pencil, and serigraph print.³ The experimentation with different media and the working and reworking of five distinct jitterbug steps over an extended period of time indicates that Johnson intended to create a series and a signature style around this rich subject matter. Much like *The Migration Series* completed by Jacob Lawrence during the same time period, Johnson's *Jitterbugs* addressed a seminal moment in African American history using a style the blended folk elements such as the aesthetics of African American quilt-making and modernist elements such as the visual language of collage and cubist-inspired forms.

Past readings of Johnson's *Jitterbugs* series have failed to consider that by using an innovative style that fused modernist and folk aesthetics, Johnson was celebrating a specifically *African American* modernism. The exclusion of Johnson's *Jitterbugs* from serious discussions of modernism in American art may have its origins in the "catch-22" that Houston Baker, Jr., identified in the discourse around Afro-America and modernism wherein, "categories such as ART, LITERATURE, CIVILIZATION, and even

³ The Smithsonian American Art Museum became the main repository of Johnson's artworks after his death. The museum holds sixteen works from the *Jitterbugs* series. Some other institutions that own works from this series are the Gallery of Art at Morgan State University in Baltimore, Maryland, the Hampton University Museum in Hampton, Virginia, and the Amon Carter Museum in Fort Worth, Texas.

MODERNISM...dominate the analytical discourse of Afro-Americas, who are assumed by the confining problematic to be without art, literature, civilization, *and* modernism.”⁴ Against this confining problematic, Baker defined two modernist strategies at work in Afro-America: the mastery of form and the deformation of mastery. To avoid a lengthy explication of Baker’s thesis, I offer the following rudimentary summary of the two modes. The mastery of form is the ingenious manipulation of the mask of minstrelsy by African American writers (Baker’s main focus) and artists in order to “give the trick to white expectations” by including “deep-rooted African sound” in modern cultural forms.⁵ The deformation of mastery, then, as articulated by Baker is an act of bold assertion rather than concealment. “*Deformation* is a go(ue)rilla action in the face of acknowledged adversaries...Rather than concealing or disguising in the manner of the *cryptic* mask (a colorful mastery of codes), the phaneric mask is meant to advertise. It distinguishes rather than conceals.”⁶ Thus, when I write that Johnson’s stylistic mode in the *Jitterbugs* series celebrates a specifically African American modernism, I am concurring with Baker’s assessment that, “What was required was a shrewd combination of formal mastery and deformative creativity,” and I am asserting that Johnson visually articulated a new style using the strategies identified by Baker.⁷

In addition to the aesthetic mode, Johnson’s choice of subject matter underscores this intent to represent a modernism specific to African American culture. Swing musicians and dancers had created modern sounds and movements by integrating the mechanized rhythms of contemporary urban life with the folk traditions of a rural past.

⁴ Houston A. Baker, Jr., *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987), xvii. Baker’s emphasis.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 49.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 50-51. Baker’s emphasis.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 71-72.

Johnson's hybrid style, which incorporates modern caricature, folk art, machine aesthetics, and a certain naïve quality associated with the primitivism of European modernism, mirrors the hybrid nature of the jitterbug—a modern dance that was based in folk traditions.

Johnson's stylistic shift was informed in part by his encounters with primitivism as filtered through the work of the European moderns, and more specifically the European expressionists with whom he had contact in the late 1920s and 1930s. Johnson experimented with expressionist woodblock prints and was intimately familiar with European expressionism from his years living and working in France and Denmark.⁸ The rough-hewn woodcut technique favored by the expressionists developed not only from the reality that the majority of these artists were not professionally trained in this technique, but also from their preference for the natural grain of the wood and from the cathartic pleasure derived from violently gouging and scraping an image from the woodblock. The primitive formal qualities produced by this technique include sharp, angular lines, unmodulated planes of pigment, and thick, heavy outlines.⁹ Johnson translated this studied unmediated and unrefined quality to his canvases, along with the expressionists' use of vivid color.

⁸ Richard J. Powell, *Homecoming: The Art and Life of William H. Johnson* (Washington, District of Columbia: The National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, 1991), 78. Through German expressionist Christoph Voll (his wife's brother-in-law) whom he met in 1928, Johnson was exposed to the work of Austrian-born German expressionist Oskar Kokoschka. Johnson referred directly to Kokoschka in a still life titled *Still Life (with Book and Fruit)* from circa 1931 by including a book with the expressionist's name emblazoned on the cover. Johnson was familiar with Emile Nolde's work, as evidenced by a reference that he made to the artist in an interview to a Danish newspaper. Johnson also admired and had occasion to meet the proto-expressionist Norwegian artist Edvard Munch in Oslo in the spring of 1935 while exhibiting at Blomqvist Gallery.

⁹ Johnson was transferring the angular lines, broad swaths of flat color and coarse outlines of woodblock prints to his painting technique. A comparison of a Johnson woodcut from circa 1939 titled *Street People* and a Johnson painting from circa 1939-1940 titled *Street Life—Harlem* could prove instructive in assessing this influence. However, it is not within the scope of this paper to present a formal comparison here.

Johnson's early appreciation for comic strips and his later examination of Miguel Covarrubias' caricatures, in particular, contributed to his representation of the jitterbugging couples. From Johnson's scrapbooks, it is clear the he was aware of the Mexican artist's work. A comparison of Johnson and Covarrubias will serve to tease out these strands of influence. Demonstrating the extent to which Johnson worked at the vanguard of modernism alongside artists such as Miguel Covarrubias and Stuart Davis who looked to popular culture for inspiration will help to broaden the framework in which art historians typically consider Johnson's work.

The analysis that follows will explore these aspects of the *Jitterbugs* while arguing that Johnson "riveted" machine aesthetics to African American bodies in his *Jitterbugs* series not only to express the modern qualities of this dance, but also to develop a radically different image of modern American identity. Johnson's vision of modern American identity included the contributions and the images of African Americans that were typically marginalized by white mainstream American culture at the time. Johnson's choice of the jitterbug over other popular social dances, such as the maxixe or the tango, indicates his interest in the African American origins and folk traditions of this specific dance. His choice also indicates a fascination with the modern qualities and machine aesthetics of this particular dance, including a spirit of improvisation, speed and flow of execution, and high-flying air steps. These competing forces—cosmopolitan and folk, machine age and primitive—underscore the modernist spirit of the *Jitterbugs*.

Just as the mainstream media promoted jazz music as a modern American invention, they also celebrated the jitterbug as a distinctively modern and American

contribution to cultural life while quietly eliding the African American origins of it. By the time that Johnson created his *Jitterbugs* series, the jitterbug had “crossed-over” to the Euro-American public to become a national dance craze. The mainstreaming of the jitterbug, in effect, obscured the contribution of African American dance traditions to this modern form of social dance. With the *Jitterbugs*, Johnson committed himself to portraying aspects of African American life that formed a crucial part of the fabric of the nation and its culture. Foregrounding an African American couple in his images was a reminder to white America of the roots of this dance. Johnson’s work from this period is remarkable in that it reflects the intertwined nature of African American and American identity in the modern era—a relationship that was not necessarily acknowledged by the American public. His art served to excavate the role of African Americans in the cultural, historic, and economic life of the nation. As Alain Locke, philosopher and spokesman of the New Negro movement, observed in his foreword to the 1925 volume, *The New Negro: An Interpretation*:

America seeking a new spiritual expansion and artistic maturity, trying to found an American literature, a national art, and national music implies a Negro-American culture seeking the same satisfactions and objectives. Separate as it may be in color and substance, the culture of the Negro is of a pattern integral with the times and with its cultural setting.¹⁰

Johnson understood that the cultural forms that were heralded as quintessentially American, such as jazz and the jitterbug, were direct descendents of African American cultural forms. The *Jitterbugs* series mirrored the sentiment expressed by Locke and others that African American and American life and culture shared an unbreakable bond.

¹⁰ Alain Locke, *The New Negro: An Interpretation* (1925; Reprint, New York: Arno Press and The New York Times, 1968), x.

This paper will demonstrate that, with his *Jitterbugs* series, Johnson created a layered symbol of “Americanness” that embodied machine age excitement and anxiety and expressed a radically different concept of national identity than “the ‘imagined community’ of Progressive America.”¹¹ Historian Gary Gerstle has pointed out that the endorsement of slavery until 1865 by the highest document in the land and a 1790 law restricting full citizenship to “free white persons” which remained on the books until 1952 implied that the ideal American society was one in which “Africans, Asians, nonwhite Latin Americans, and, in the 1920s, southern and eastern Europeans did not belong in the republic and could never be accepted as full-fledged members.”¹² The state-sanctioned relegation of nonwhites to second-class status informed Johnson’s fraught relationship with his native country and the articulation of “Americanness” in his art. Historian Eric Foner has asserted that “the idea of ‘race’ as a permanent, defining characteristic of individuals and social groups retained a powerful hold on [Progressive American] thinking.”¹³ Johnson’s acute awareness of his mixed race background and his extended sojourn abroad helped shape his identity and encouraged him to resist the ossification of racial categories in his work. These unique experiences conditioned Johnson to view racial and national boundaries as unstable. When Johnson created his *Jitterbugs* series, the mutability of seemingly intractable categorizations such as skin color was not a new concept for the artist. He had toyed with this idea in the woodcut titled *Willie and Holcha* of circa 1935 (Fig. 6). In this poignant work, Johnson portrays his Danish, fair-skinned wife with dark skin, essentially repudiating racial difference in

¹¹ Eric Foner, *The Story of American Freedom* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1998), 185.

¹² Gary Gerstle, *American Crucible: Race and Nation in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2001), 4-5.

¹³ Foner, 185.

favor of spiritual affinity. Obviously, for Johnson, outward visual distinction disappeared in the face of inner kinship. This woodblock print demonstrates Johnson's willingness to subvert conventional ideas of racial difference in his art.

In an effort to move away from racially centered categorizations of artists such as Johnson, Richard Powell has defined an integration-minded "blues aesthetic." According to Powell:

The idea of a blues aesthetic situates the discourse squarely on: 1) art produced in our time; 2) creative expressions that emanate from artists who are empathetic with Afro-American issues and ideals; 3) work that identifies with grassroots, popular, and/or mass black American culture; 4) art that has an affinity with Afro-U.S.-derived music and/or rhythms; and 5) artists and/or artistic statements whose *raison d'être* is humanistic.¹⁴

This blues aesthetic is a solid jumping off point for an examination of Johnson's art, especially his *Jitterbugs* series. Under Powell's rubric, the work of artists such as George Luks, Archibald Motley, Stuart Davis, and Jacob Lawrence shares an essential spirit with that of Johnson. Though their styles differ dramatically, Powell identifies a common thread that links these artists and situates them under an inclusive modernist framework related to the blues.

Despite this commendable effort to reposition Johnson's work in a broader framework, the artist is most often associated exclusively with the Harlem Renaissance. For example, the curators for the Studio Museum in Harlem's 1987 exhibition and catalogue, *Harlem Renaissance: Art of Black America*, portrayed Johnson as one of the primary artists of the movement. Considering Johnson within the framework of the Harlem Renaissance, however, is problematic both chronologically and ideologically. The artist arrived in New York and became fully committed to the new style that

¹⁴ Richard J. Powell, *The Blues Aesthetic: Black Culture and Modernism* (Washington, District of Columbia: Washington Project for the Arts, 1989), 21, 23 (Powell's emphasis).

characterized some of his most innovative work at the very end of the 1930s, which places him outside of the typical timeframe of the Harlem Renaissance.¹⁵ Significantly, some scholars have challenged the traditional chronological and geographical parameters of the Harlem Renaissance in recent exhibitions and texts. As co-curators of *Rhapsodies in Black: Art of the Harlem Renaissance*, Richard Powell and David Bailey sought to expand these boundaries—for visual arts in particular—to include a variety of media, geographies outside of Harlem, and a timeframe that extends beyond the decade prior to the 1929 Stock Market Crash.¹⁶

While it is valid to consider Johnson in the context of a Harlem Renaissance, this framework is limiting for scholars who wish to avoid compartmentalizing the contributions of African American artists such as Johnson. Race was a factor in Johnson's work, but it did not completely define his art. Reading Johnson and his work through the Harlem Renaissance alone risks an interpretation that suppresses the complexity of the artist's geographically and racially liminal identity. Growing up as a mixed race child in a small town in South Carolina and living abroad as an American in Denmark, Johnson constantly felt his "otherness." His light skin and wavy hair, so different from that of his siblings, led to speculation in his hometown that Johnson's biological father was white. Be that as it may, there is no definitive proof of this and Johnson never felt compelled to publicly address the rumors that he had Caucasian

¹⁵ The Harlem Renaissance is traditionally dated from 1919 to 1929 (or from the end of World War I to the beginning of the Great Depression); see Mary Schmidt Campbell, et al., *Harlem Renaissance: Art of Black America* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1987), 11; also, see David A. Bailey and Richard J. Powell, *Rhapsodies in Black: Art of the Harlem Renaissance* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1997), 16-17. In William B. Scott and Peter M. Rutkoff, *New York Modern: The Arts and the City* (Baltimore, Maryland: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), Scott and Rutkoff make a distinction between the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s, which was primarily literary, and a Second Harlem Renaissance beginning in the mid-1930s, which was principally artistic (258).

¹⁶ Bailey and Powell, 11-17.

ancestry. He did, however, proudly proclaim his African American and American Indian heritage during numerous interviews, making it safe to assume that Johnson identified himself as mixed race.¹⁷ Never quite at home on the North American continent or the European continent, he straddled the Atlantic during much of his adult life. Johnson studied independently in Europe for two years, returning home once to exhibit and visit family and friends before marrying and settling in Denmark. Two close friends discouraged him from returning to the United States to live, because they felt that the racism that he was sure to encounter would impede his development as an artist and cause he and his Danish wife undue anguish. Despite these warnings and Johnson's own first-hand knowledge of racial prejudice in his native land, Johnson felt a need to return to the United States. Because of this unwillingness to repudiate his native country, Johnson should not be considered an expatriate. It is more helpful to think of Johnson as an American who, like many Americans of African descent, had an uneasy relationship with his homeland.

Likewise, Johnson inhabits an uneasy space in histories of American art. Important studies of modernism, which would have benefited from his work's inclusion, have excluded Johnson, because he worked mainly in a representational mode. Critics and art historians have tended to interpret this figural style as outmoded and regressive.

¹⁷ In *Homecoming: The Art and Life of William H. Johnson*, Richard J. Powell presents little evidence that Johnson was of mixed race, besides the speculation of acquaintances of the family, but he leaves open this possibility, stating, "it is quite possible that she [William H. Johnson's mother, Alice Johnson] and Henry [William H. Johnson's father] shared some element of caucasian ancestry as well. Moreover, interracial connections—covert or overt, forced or free—had a far longer and broader history in South Carolina than residents cared to acknowledge, and it was not uncommon for racial traits from previous generations to show up visibly in later offspring" (5). That Johnson identified himself as mixed-race can be inferred by his repeated references to his American Indian and African American heritage in interviews with Scandinavian reporters. Johnson never mentions any white ancestry; however, Powell asserts that "a sense of decorum and respect for his family would not have allowed Johnson to make any public mention of black-white miscegenation, despite its occurrence in American society" (230).

Because of the teleological narrative that locates the apex of American modernism with abstract expressionism and defines the significant early moderns as creating in a nonrepresentational mode, critics have relegated artists who insisted on representing the figure to the margins of modernism. As a move toward correcting this bias, it is fruitful to reconsider Johnson in the context of Wanda Corn's framework of the "transatlantics" and the "rooted" as presented in her 1999 study, *The Great American Thing: Modern Art and National Identity, 1915-1935*.¹⁸

Considering Johnson within this framework challenges the simplistic notion of Johnson as an artist defined by the Harlem Renaissance alone and addresses an omission in Corn's otherwise brilliant study—the exclusion of African American modernists. It is important to note that in the book's preface, Corn addresses the absence of African American artists in her scholarly inquiry. Explaining the reasons for the lack of African American artists to whom her "transatlantic" framework could be applied, Corn points to the racial discrimination of the era, "the modernists' lack of commitment to any social program that might have encouraged artists of color or invited them to feel welcome in downtown gallery settings," and the fact that many African American artists of this period were "genre painters working in figurative modes that modernists avoided."¹⁹

Though it is understandable that Corn wished to limit her study of modernism to artists working in non-figurative modes, it is also highly questionable that a sharp line can be drawn between figurative and non-figurative modes in the work of early American modernists such as Charles Demuth and Charles Sheeler, both included in Corn's study. Demuth oscillated between abstraction and figuration, and Sheeler worked exclusively in

¹⁸ Wanda Corn, *The Great American Thing: Modern Art and National Identity, 1915-1935* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1999), xix.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, xx-xxi.

a representational mode. Thus, the modernist criterion of non-figuration that Corn cites as a reason for the exclusion of African American artists from her investigation does not always hold true. Classified as a figurative artist, Johnson often blurred the line between the representational and the abstract in his landscapes and even experimented with non-representational modes in his *Jitterbugs (IV)* images. Johnson navigated artistic centers on both sides of the Atlantic, and his figurative mode should not preclude him from being considered under the rubric of the “transatlantic” and therefore alongside Corn’s iconic American modernists.

According to Corn, two artistic types originated during World War I. The “rooted” artists were American artists who worked in and around New York in the post-World War I era. For Corn, Charles Demuth, Georgia O’Keeffe, and Charles Sheeler exemplified this type. The “transatlantic” artists, on the other hand, “crisscrossed the Atlantic and worked both in Europe—usually Paris—and in New York.”²⁰ This “transatlantique” was either American or European, exemplified by artists such as Marcel Duchamp, Gerald Murphy, and Joseph Stella, who resided temporarily outside of their native lands and contributed to an international exchange of ideas, but nevertheless retained allegiances to their home countries. Corn uses this framework to discuss the early American modernists and the displaced European artists who, she asserts, “laid the groundwork for the mid-century’s obsession with Americanness and an American style.”²¹ Johnson’s work, especially his *Jitterbugs* series sought to locate Americanness and modernity in a virtually invisible segment of the country’s populace and their contributions to the nation. With *Jitterbugs* he also sought to define the national

²⁰ Ibid., 91.

²¹ Ibid., xvi.

character as young, vibrant, and the product of the machine age.²² By visually fusing his figures with machine aesthetics, Johnson created a complex emblem of modern American identity that spoke to the mechanization of the everyday lives of Americans. In this transposition of mechanical and human, Johnson's concerns were descended from those of Francis Picabia and his mechanical portraits, *Ici, c'est ici Stieglitz* (1915), *Portrait d'une jeune fille américaine dans l'état de nudité, 1915* (1915), and *Américaine* (1917), which were inspired by Marcel Duchamp's machinist aesthetic. In this framework, Johnson was also aligned with Charles Demuth and Charles Sheeler through a keen interest in defining Americanness in relationship to machine age America (though Demuth and Sheeler utilized industrial landscapes rather than mechanical portraiture). When one regards Johnson's work in this light, its affinity with the work of the "transatlantics" is thrown into high relief.

In contrast to an expatriate, Corn defined a "transatlantic" as someone who "did not renounce their birthplace and assumed they might someday go home again."²³ After receiving his formal art training at the National Academy of Design in New York, Johnson lived almost uninterrupted in Europe for over a decade. Yet, Johnson did not revoke his American citizenship during these years. When the decision was made that it was not safe to stay in Denmark because of the impending war, Johnson confided to a friend that he felt a desire to return to the United States.

²² The machine age is typically defined as the time period from approximately 1919 to 1945 (or from the end of World War I to the end of World War II); see Dinerstein, 5; also see Richard Guy Wilson et al., *The Machine Age in America 1918-1941* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., Publishers, 1986), 16. Others define this era as encompassing a broader timeframe, 1890-1940 (or three years prior to Chicago's Columbian Exposition to just prior to the U.S. entry into World War II); see Gilman M. Ostrander, *American Civilization in the First Machine Age: 1890-1940* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1970), 3-4.

²³ Corn, 91-92.

Corn also identified an impulse among “transatlantic” artists such as Duchamp and Murphy to revel in the role of the foreigner and “use their otherness to charm the locals.”²⁴ This was a persona that Johnson often took on when talking with European journalists. In interviews with local newspapers in Scandinavia, Johnson emphasized the importance of his mixed Native American and African blood to his calling as an artist. “My father was black and my mother is Indian...and both of these people have in them an artistic tendency which clearly has culminated in me.”²⁵ In the unresolved relationship to his native country and in his assumed persona of the “exotic American” while in Europe, he embodied characteristics of the “transatlantic” artist.

His contemporaries perceived this “rootlessness” in Johnson’s work. While he was abroad, the work of the postimpressionists and expressionists influenced Johnson’s work, leading to the most common critique leveled at his art by American critics—that his subject matter was not authentically American. Evelyn Brown mentioned this in a 1938 letter to the artist. “They [American critics] do feel sometimes...that in your selection of subject matter there is too close a resemblance to Van Gogh, and some of the other well-known modern painters, to give them the look of your own originality.”²⁶ Johnson took these comments to heart and after his return to the United States later that year, he began painting American subjects—Harlem street musicians, southern farmers, and jitterbug dancers—in a new style that was reminiscent simultaneously of African sculpture, medieval tapestries, woodblock prints, comic strips, and caricature.

²⁴ Ibid., 92.

²⁵ Johnson quoted in an interview with a Danish newspaper in Richard J. Powell, “In My Family of Primitiveness and Tradition’: William H. Johnson’s Jesus and the Three Marys,” in *Critical Issues in American Art: A Book of Readings*, ed. Mary Ann Calo (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1998), 292n3.

²⁶ Evelyn S. Brown to William H. Johnson, April 25, 1938, container 77, Harmon Foundation Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, District of Columbia.

Critics and institutions have found the fluidity of Johnson's identity and the shifts in his style difficult to grasp. This is symptomatic of a larger tendency in the critical discourse surrounding African American artists that tends to ghettoize their contributions to American art.²⁷ Originating with critics in the interwar years, this discourse has shaped the way that scholars have written histories of African American art. The tendency to compare African American artists from the first half of the twentieth century to other American artists of African descent rather than to an ethnically diverse field of their peers has veiled the influence that these artists have had on mainstream American art and culture. Moreover, this tendency has excluded African American artists from the canon of American art. By unburdening Johnson of allegiances to any single movement, one can read the *Jitterbugs* as embodying concerns of national identity that are typically attributed to the work of his Euro-American contemporaries.

In 1936, the Harlem Artists' Guild published a critique of the Harmon Foundation's philanthropic and promotional policies in *Art Front*. The Harmon Foundation was founded in 1922 to recognize the achievements of African Americans in the fine arts and other fields, and its support is bound up with the history of the Harlem Renaissance. The Harlem Artists' Guild asserted that the Harmon Foundation privileged expressions of "racial" qualities over all other artistic criteria. The Guild considered these policies to be potentially harmful to the development and establishment of African American artists as a cultural force in the larger art world.²⁸ While he was living abroad, Johnson voiced similar concerns in his letters to Mary Beattie Brady, Executive Director

²⁷ Mary Ann Calo has convincingly argued this point in her recent publication, *Distinction and Denial: Race, Nation, and the Critical Construction of the African American Artist, 1920-40* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: The University of Michigan Press, 2007).

²⁸ Calo, 95-96.

of the Harmon Foundation. Although the Harmon Foundation recognized his skill in 1929 with their Award for Distinguished Achievements Among Negroes in the Fine Arts Field, by the mid-1930s Johnson had grown frustrated with what he felt was the Harmon Foundation's less than enthusiastic promotion of his work. In one letter to Brady, he asked if perhaps his work was "not negroid enough," expressing his misgivings about the Foundation's promotion of a racialized aesthetic.²⁹ Thus, to discuss Johnson's work principally as a product of the Harlem Renaissance and the movement's attendant philosophies about "authentic, racial" expressions is to obfuscate layers of meaning in his art that speak to the ecstasies and anxieties of the artist's unique confrontation with and resolution of the paradoxes of what it meant to be an American and an African American in the modern world.

One of Johnson's friends recalled that toward the end of his extended European sojourn the artist explicitly expressed "the need to come back to his own country and paint his own people."³⁰ With his *Jitterbugs* series, Johnson envisioned a fundamentally different image of Americanness than most cultural critics, politicians, and other ostensible authorities were proposing at the time. Defining "Americanness" was obviously not a twentieth-century invention. In 1782, J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur

²⁹ William H. Johnson to Mary Beattie Brady, February 25, 1938, container 77, Harmon Foundation Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, District of Columbia.

³⁰ Helen Harriton to Mary Beattie Brady, September 30, 1956, container 77, Harmon Foundation Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, District of Columbia. Her full remard reads as follows. "The next we heard from them was a letter, saying that they intended to come to the U. S. that fall—written by him. We wrote back trying to discourage them—reminding him of the discrimination the negro suffers in the U. S., and with anxiety as to what it would mean to his gentle wife. Nevertheless, he wrote again that they were coming—that they feared there would be a war in Europe soon (he was so right) which he wished to avoid, and also because he felt the need to come back to his own country and paint his own people."

famously asked the question, “What, then, is the American, this new man?”³¹ In Crèvecoeur’s estimation, the blood of many races flowed through the veins of the American, but these races were inevitably white. “I could point out to you a family whose grandfather was an Englishman, whose wife was Dutch, whose son married a French woman, and whose present four sons have now four wives of different nations.”³² Gary Gerstle has pointed out that although Crèvecoeur had sympathy for the plight of the American Indians and disgust for the enslavement of Africans in this country, he thought nothing of excluding these two groups from the races that constituted his idea of Americanness.³³ When Crèvecoeur stated that it was in America where “individuals of all nations are melted into a new race of men,” he was not referring to these particular nations.³⁴ Likewise, more than a century later, the playwright Israel Zangwill famously reiterated this enduring notion of America as the melting pot, and maintained more or less the same European “ingredients” as Crèvecoeur. The bright-eyed, exuberant protagonist, David Quixano, in Zangwill’s *The Melting-Pot* exclaims, “America is God’s Crucible, the great Melting-Pot where all the races of Europe are melting and re-forming!...Germans and Frenchmen, Irishmen and Englishmen, Jews and Russians—into the Crucible with you all! God is making the American.”³⁵ Here again there seems to have been no place for African Americans and other non-Europeans in the forging of the American idea and ideal. By contrast, Johnson’s Americans in the *Jitterbugs* series had

³¹ J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, *Letters from an American Farmer and Sketches of Eighteenth-Century America* (New York: Penguin Books, 1981), 69. *Letters from an American Farmer* was first published in 1782, then with revisions in 1783 in London by Davies and Davis. The Penguin Books edition is based on the 1783 publication. Citations are to the Penguin Books edition.

³² *Ibid.*, 69-70.

³³ Gerstle, 22, 378-379n12.

³⁴ Crèvecoeur, 70.

³⁵ Israel Zangwill, *From the Ghetto to the Melting Pot: Israel Zangwill’s Jewish Plays* (Detroit, Michigan: Wayne State University Press, 2006), 288. The play, *The Melting-Pot* premiered in Washington, DC, in 1908. Citations are to the Wayne State University Press edition (a collection of three of Zangwill’s plays).

varying tones of dark skin. Johnson's "new man" was not just a man, but a man and a woman intertwined. This image was revolutionary in that it displaced the default notion of Americanness as white and exclusively male.³⁶ As historian Lewis Erenberg has noted:

An American identity based on whiteness was first questioned during the swing era. Many saw the music as an opening wedge for greater equality, although they might differ over how or what that meant. At the same time a number of businessmen in the mass media tried to keep the music white in order to ensure the largest possible "mass" market. These competing forces helped shape the limits of swing.³⁷

It is with this observation that the current investigation begins.

Chapter one lays out the socio-historical context in which Johnson's *Jitterbugs* series was created. A short review of the dances that led up to the jitterbug dance craze of the swing era presents parallel instances in which African American dance forms crossed-over to white audience and in the process were stripped of their original sources. Chapter two is a visual analysis of the *Jitterbugs* series and a consideration of the influences that contributed to Johnson's stylistic shift on his return to the United States. Finally, chapter three explores Johnson's *Jitterbugs* as a modern American icon embodying machine age aesthetics.

³⁶ While an investigation into the gendering of the symbols of American identity and a study of the *Jitterbugs* as a representation that works against the grain of certain priapic emblems would undoubtedly be fascinating and fruitful, it is beyond the scope of this paper. This paper explores the idea that the *Jitterbugs* were images that dislodged the idea of "Americanness" as exclusively Euro-American and white.

³⁷ Lewis A. Erenberg, *Swingin' the Dream: Big Band Jazz and the Rebirth of American Culture* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), xv.

Chapter One: The Roots of Swing

When the artist William H. Johnson arrived in New York Harbor on Thanksgiving Day 1938, after living abroad for more than a decade, he was leaving a continent on the cusp of war and entering a country attempting to “swing” itself out of the Great Depression. With the Stock Market Crash of 1929, the “Roaring 20s” came to an abrupt end. The period of freewheeling flappers, Prohibition-Era speakeasies, and the Charleston dance craze fueled by jazz music gave way to years of skyrocketing unemployment (over 25 percent at times), poverty, and homelessness. During these lean years, Americans jettisoned expensive forms of entertainment for more economical diversions such as the cinema and radio. From 1929 to 1932, the popularity of radio grew steadily. In 1930, more than 600 radio stations broadcasted programs to over 40 percent of American households.³⁸ By 1940, some 90 percent of American households owned at least one radio, and dance music occupied more airtime than any other format.³⁹ The radio provided a venue for swing musicians such as Benny Goodman, Paul Whiteman, and Duke Ellington to reach a mass audience. Swing music entered the consciousness of the American public through the airwaves, but it was on the dance floors that the liveliness of the music was enhanced by the spontaneity and vigor of the dances that accompanied it. Dance halls showcased this new type of jazz and served as hothouses of the improvised, energetic dance that would come to be called the jitterbug. Many dance halls began to cut ticket prices during the Depression. Like radio, dance halls such as the Savoy Ballroom became a relatively inexpensive alternative to the theater and other traditional amusements.

³⁸ Ralph G. Giordano, *Social Dancing in America: A History and Reference, Volume Two, Lindy Hop to Hip Hop, 1901-2000* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2007), 49.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 87.

At this time, the U.S. government enacted legislation in an attempt to alleviate the economic pressures brought on by the Great Depression. Under the New Deal the Roosevelt administration created many programs including the Federal Emergency Relief Administration and the Civilian Conservation Corps in 1933, and the Works Progress Administration (WPA) in 1935. One of the civic projects assigned to the WPA was to construct and refurbish recreational facilities such as public dance pavilions.⁴⁰ Johnson himself sought work through the WPA and was assigned to teach art at the Harlem Community Arts Center.⁴¹ During this time, the artist created paintings, drawings, and prints of dancing couples titled *Jitterbugs*. His multi-media series celebrated the exuberant fashions and frenetic energy of a new breed of young dancers from Harlem who were taking dance steps from earlier in the century and transforming them into a low-flowing, high-flying style of dance called the jitterbug that was performed and developed in conjunction with the big band swing music of the time.

The Swing Era

It is difficult to pin down a definitive definition of swing. Most jazz musicians of the time declined to define swing as a new genre separate from jazz. For them, rather than being a new type of music, swing was a different way of playing jazz music. Benny Goodman explained that, “In a word, swing is a *property* of music played in a certain way, rather than a definite kind of music itself. But it may be said that it is usually induced by a contrast in accents, in which the normally weak beats of a measure (the

⁴⁰ Ibid., 78.

⁴¹ Powell, *Homecoming*, 124.

second and fourth) are emphasized against the expectation of the listener.”⁴² In a 1939 article for *The New York Times Magazine*, critic Gama Gilbert simultaneously defined swing as “an esthetic property derived from improvisation on the musical materials of jazz,” and insisted on its un-definability: “It is a qualitative value, not a form subject to definition by rule.”⁴³ Dance historian Ralph Giordano defines swing music in terms of the instruments that comprise a swing band. “Swing differed from Jazz in that it was accentuated by resounding drum beats and the addition of more brass instruments of horns, trombones, and saxophones. By 1934, the typical dance band included three trumpets, two trombones, four saxophones, piano, guitar, drums, and bass, resulting in the subsequent name of the ‘Big Band’ sound.”⁴⁴

Contemporary anecdotes traditionally trace the birth of the swing era to a performance by Benny Goodman’s orchestra at the Palomar Ballroom in Los Angeles in July 1935, but the reality is that swing developed much more gradually.⁴⁵ Duke Ellington is credited with coining the term “swing” in 1932 with his hit song, “It Don’t Mean a Thing if It Ain’t Got that Swing,” and musicians had been playing jazz in a “swinging” style since the 1920s, but it was Benny Goodman who became the ambassador to white America of this new way of playing jazz. In 1935, Goodman and his band had received lukewarm responses from audiences as they toured their way west across the United States. But at the end of their trek to the Pacific Coast, they drew a high-energy audience at Los Angeles’ Palomar Ballroom. More than 2,500 avid young fans who had listened

⁴² Benny Goodman defines swing in this manner in his 1939 autobiography. Benny Goodman and Irving Kolodin, *The Kingdom of Swing*, (1939; reprint, New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1961), 174-175. Goodman’s emphasis.

⁴³ Gama Gilbert, “Swing,” *New York Times Magazine* (November 19, 1939): 19.

⁴⁴ Giordano, 87.

⁴⁵ David W. Stowe, *Swing Changes: Big-Band Jazz in New Deal America* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1994), 3-7.

to Goodman and his band on the radio show *Lets Dance* during the previous fall and winter came prepared to “cut a rug” to his band’s brand of fast-paced jazz. The teenage audience’s zeal for this “new” up-tempo, “swinging” sound convinced the Los Angeles establishment to double the length of the booking for Goodman’s band. As they toured their way back east, Goodman and his band received a decidedly more enthusiastic reception from audiences than on the first leg of the tour. After his electrifying engagement at the Palomar, the press crowned Goodman the “King of Swing.” Today, he is credited with introducing swing to a national audience. That the established national mythology of swing revolves around a white jazz musician speaks volumes about the historical obfuscation of the African American roots of much American cultural production. While Goodman certainly played a large role in the story of swing, credit for this phenomenon of music and dance cannot be placed solely with one person or performance. Goodman himself pointed out, “Swing certainly wasn’t originated by myself or other current bandleaders. We simply helped develop something that has been growing for decades.”⁴⁶

Goodman was one of the first band leaders to integrate his musical talent. Erenberg has pointed out, “These challenges to white supremacy occurred a good decade before such changes took place in major league baseball or the armed forces...In their own way, swing musicians served as models for racial pride and represented an assault on racial restrictions; they created a national black music that announced that African Americans had a rightful place in American life and culture.”⁴⁷ Reclamation of the

⁴⁶ Benny Goodman quoted in Gilbert, 14.

⁴⁷ Erenberg, xv.

diverse and revolutionary origins of jazz/swing music and dance can serve as a model that works against the grain of a homogenizing narrative of Americanness.

Jazz music had its beginnings in New Orleans with musicians who blended the banjo sounds and rhythms of African American slave culture, the ragtime piano style of the Midwest, the delta blues of the Mississippi River Valley, and elements of French Creole, Spanish, and Old World European music. As this quintessentially African American art form traveled to different cities with “Big Easy” musicians such as Jelly Roll Morton, a variety of regional jazz styles developed. In the first decades of the twentieth century when jazz was emerging from its cradle in the South, many African American bands started playing a fast-paced, spontaneous style of jazz music called “hot jazz” in Chicago, New York, and the San Francisco Barbary Coast, among other places. The more commercially successful jazz bands that garnered the lucrative contracts in the early years of radio were white bands that typically played “symphonic” rather than “hot” jazz. In the 1920s, Paul Whiteman—dubbed the “King of Jazz” in the white press—mainstreamed the symphonic type of jazz among Euro-American audiences. By this time, upright basses and guitars replaced the tubas and banjos of the earlier jazz bands, and more musicians were added to the mix, evolving the smaller jazz bands of the early decades of the century into the big swing bands of the 1930s and 40s. Hot jazz definitively hit the mainstream scene through the efforts of musicians such as Duke Ellington and Benny Goodman as the era of swing dawned.⁴⁸

⁴⁸ Giordano, 50-52.

The Animal Dances and the Charleston

The jitterbug is inextricably linked to the swing era, because the dance developed alongside the music. The jitterbug, however, was not the only dance craze of the first half of the twentieth century that grew in conjunction with a new genre of music. The animal dances and Charleston dance fad of the 1910s and 20s developed alongside ragtime and jazz respectively. A thread that runs through all of these dances—the animal dances, the Charleston, and the jitterbug—is the way in which they became incorporated into the fabric of American culture. Initially, these dances were fostered in African American communities. As the dances gained popularity in metropolitan performance and social dance venues, religious leaders and dance purists began to condemn them as reprobate, using thinly veiled racist and sexist language. However, as the popularity of these dances refused to wane, the traces of the African American origins of these dances were handily effaced by the culture industry (Broadway, Hollywood, and the mainstream print media), thus denying the heterogeneous origins of this cultural form. Consequently, these dances, particularly the jitterbug, were held up to represent a non-existent, but at the time for many Euro-Americans, compelling Americanness that was homogenous and white.

From the late 1890s to the end of the First World War, ragtime grew in popularity and became the dominant dance music of the period. Ragtime music had deep roots in African American tradition and it adapted elements of Sousa marches even as it supplanted them as the popular genre. From roughly 1911 to 1915, the animal dance craze swept the nation in response to ragtime and early jazz. Dance scholars have traced elements of the animal dance called the turkey trot to an African slave dance called the

buzzard lope.⁴⁹ As with the history of swing music and the jitterbug, the story of the rise of ragtime music is inextricably linked to the story of the rise of the animal dances that accompanied it. The animal dances—the turkey trot, the grizzly bear, and the bunny hug, among others—rose to prominence when the popularity of ragtime music was at its zenith, and like ragtime music, these dances had roots in southern African American communities.

Like almost all new social dances of this century, when they were first introduced to a national audience, the animal dances provoked cries of immorality and vulgarity, particularly among religious leaders and so-called dance authorities. In 1914, the Vatican issued an official condemnation of the turkey trot. That same year, a woman from Paterson, New Jersey, was reportedly arrested for performing the dance and sentenced to fifty days in jail.⁵⁰ In his instructional dance manual, *Social Dancing of To-Day*, John Murray Anderson declared that the turkey trot came to the East Coast, “in a form to which the word ‘dancing’ could be applied only by exercise of courtesy. Literally, caricaturists could not caricature it; it made caricatures of its devotees.” He asserted that the turkey trot, by this point (1914), had shed its objectionable components, “Of the original ‘trot’ nothing remains but the basic step. The elements that drew denunciation upon it have gone from the abiding-places of politeness.”⁵¹ And, by “the abiding-places of politeness,” Anderson was almost certainly alluding to what he referred to later as “Anglo-Saxon ballrooms.”⁵² The racial undertones to Anderson’s denunciation were

⁴⁹ Lynne Fauley Emery, *Black Dance: From 1619 to Today*, 2nd ed. (Hightstown, New Jersey: Princeton Book Company, Publishers, 1988), 235.

⁵⁰ Marshall Stearns and Jean Stearns, *Jazz Dance: The Story of American Vernacular Dance* (1968; reprint, New York: Da Capo Press, 1994), 96.

⁵¹ Both quotes are from John Murray Anderson’s instructional dance manual. John Murray Anderson, *Social Dancing of To-Day* (New York: Frederick A. Stokes Company, 1914), 2-3.

⁵² Anderson, 30.

common during the period. Later, the jitterbug would come under the same sort of attack from so-called dance authorities. In a 1940 article, *The Dancing Times* endorsed the jitterbug in general as “modern,” but denounced the “Harlem” version as vulgar. “If the ‘Jitterbug’ is a nuisance and behaves as if he is in a Harlem night club,” Alex Moore of *The Dancing Times* advised his readers, “by all means turn him out.”⁵³

After the first decade of the twentieth century, dance teachers such as John Murray Anderson and Irene and Vernon Castle mainstreamed and made “acceptable” for white consumption the “vulgar” animal dances. While Anderson and Moore were direct in their racially-based condemnations of “crude” performances of modern social dances, the Castles were more subtle in their condescension. The Castles had taken full advantage of the popularity of the social dances associated with the rise of ragtime, and by 1913 they were performing the turkey trot on Broadway in *The Sunshine Girl*.⁵⁴ As dance instructors, they taught the Castle walk (a subdued version of the two-step), the maxixe, the hesitation waltz, the tango, the foxtrot, and the one-step, which was essentially a “refined” version of the turkey trot.⁵⁵ The following year, however, they simultaneously opened their dance studio Castle House, penned the book *Modern Dancing*, and denounced the animal dances that had contributed to their Broadway successes as “hideous” and “vulgar.”⁵⁶ Reveling in their role as the arbiters of good taste, the Castles advised their disciples to “Drop the Turkey Trot, the Grizzly Bear, the Bunny Hug, etc. These dances are ugly, ungraceful, and out of fashion.”⁵⁷ This was a coded

⁵³ Alex Moore, “Will the War Change the ‘English Style’?: The Jitterbug Menace,” *The Dancing Times* (March 1940): 358.

⁵⁴ Stearns and Stearns, 97.

⁵⁵ Giordano, 9-13.

⁵⁶ Irene Castle and Vernon Castle, *Modern Dancing* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1914), 170-71.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 177.

indictment of the African American culture from which these dances arose. In the foreword to *Modern Dancing*, the Castles asserted, “Our aim is to *uplift* dancing, *purify* it, and *place it before the public* in its proper light.”⁵⁸ The “purified” one-step, was deemed acceptable for the public, but not its African American twin, the turkey trot. Implicit in the Castles’ word choice is the idea that the original form of the dance (the African American form) was lowly (in need of uplift) and tarnished (in need of purification).

The short-lived, Charleston dance craze of the 1920s has endured in the national memory as a defining image of the Roaring Twenties. Like the animal dances, the Charleston has its roots in African American dance traditions. In his book, *Blues People: The Negro Experience in White America and the Music the Developed From It*, LeRoi Jones (now Amiri Baraka) claimed a West African antecedent—an Ashanti ancestor dance—for the Charleston.⁵⁹ The modern form of the dance likely coalesced in 1913 at the Jungles Casino in Charleston, South Carolina, though some give an earlier date of “birth.”⁶⁰ The dance—performed to the fast-paced jazz of the time—was included in African American musicals and theatrical shows in the early 1920s and “crossed-over” to white audiences starting in 1923 when it was included in the *Ziegfeld Follies*.⁶¹

During the Charleston dance craze, a fascinating visual culture developed around the dance that presaged the association of swing dance with the technology of flight. In a 1925 newsreel titled “Charleston Dance Contests,” couples were filmed dancing in a plane and one thrill-seeker was filmed dancing the Charleston on the upper wing of a

⁵⁸ Ibid., 18. Emphasis added.

⁵⁹ LeRoi Jones, *Blues People: The Negro Experience in White America and the Music the Developed From It* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1963), 17.

⁶⁰ Giordano, 54, and Stearns and Stearns, 112.

⁶¹ Stearns and Stearns, 112.

biplane.⁶² By combining the Charleston with the most exciting technology of the time, the filmmakers were associating this fast-paced, highly kinetic dance with modernity. Despite the deep African and African American roots of the Charleston, mainstream visual culture tended to “whiten” the dance. On February 18, 1926, *Life* magazine’s cover illustration showed an older, white gentleman and a young, white flapper performing the Charleston (Fig. 7). This image implied the reach of the dance craze across generations, but apparently not races.

As with the animal dance craze earlier in the century, the Charleston and the Lindy hop were often associated with pre-marital sex and moral corruption. Church leaders and others voiced their distain for the new social dances and attempted to regulate the dances and the dance halls where they were performed. In 1929, the U.S. Department of Labor published the findings of a national study titled *Public Dance Halls: Their Regulation and Place in the Recreation of Adolescents Bureau Publication No. 189*. The goal of this study was to investigate the “dance-hall problem in cities.”⁶³ The government argued dance halls were a threat to traditional religious and moral life and especially to the honor and virtue of women. Many of the municipal dance halls surveyed in this study had regulations in place that restricted the days and times that they were to stay open, the types of dances that could legally be performed on the dance floor, and the age and partner-status of patrons. Some rules spelled out the proper way to dance, including the acceptable space that should be between dance partners. Some authorities suggested the addition of a “bumper belt” to women’s attire to maintain the proper distance between dancing couples. This “accessory” consisted of several sticks

⁶² *America Dances! 1897-1948: A Collector’s Edition of Social Dance in Film*, DVD, collected and organized by Carol Téten (Kentfield, California: Dancetime Publications, 2003).

⁶³ Giordano, 71.

jutting out of a belt, and was intended to keep the gentleman dance partner at bay (Fig. 8). Violation of the dance hall laws of the municipality could and did result in fines and jail time.⁶⁴

The Origins of the Jitterbug

Originally called the Lindy hop, the jitterbug developed in 1930s America alongside swing music. The terms “jitterbug” and “Lindy hop” became synonymous over time, and some maintain that this is paradigmatic of the appropriation of the dance by white America.⁶⁵ For instance, Norma Miller, a member of the Savoy Ballroom’s celebrated dance troupe, Whitey’s Lindy Hoppers, has stated that, “Jitterbug is the white word for Lindy hop.”⁶⁶

Anecdotes that claim primacy for the coining of the term “jitterbug” seem to abound. Considering Miller’s statement, it is surprising that many of these anecdotes credit the term’s creation to African American swing musicians. Trombonist Joseph “Tricky Sam” Nanton of the Ellington band shared the following story with a journalist for a 1945 *Metronome* article:

Around 1929...Harry White came into the band for four or five weeks...you remember “Father” White, of the famous White Brothers Orchestra of Washington...well, don’t let anybody tell you differently...Father White originated the word “jitterbug”! He had a pet name for all his musician pals...used to call them “my bug.” Whenever Father White had a solo to play, he always stepped off the stand or into the wings and took himself a big snort of what he called “jitter sauce”...and believe me, he really had ‘em every day. One day, however, some practical joker hid Father’s bottle, and in his agitation to get

⁶⁴ Ibid., 72-73.

⁶⁵ Following the lead of the majority of dance historians, I use the two terms interchangeably in this paper.

⁶⁶ Norma Miller interviewed in *The Call of the Jitterbug*, VHS, directed by Jesper Sorensen, Vibeke Winding, Tana Ross and produced by Green Room Productions (New York: Filmmakers Library, 1988).

it back and into the spot for his solo, he hollered: “Whoinhell took my jitterbug?” And somehow it floated around and finally got fastened onto the lindy-hoppers.⁶⁷

Others credit Cab Calloway with originating the term. Calloway reportedly likened the dancing of Lindy hoppers to “the frenzy of jittering bugs” in 1934 and even assembled his own “dictionary” of swing terms—including the word “jitterbug”—that was published in 1938 and titled *Cab Calloway’s Hepster Dictionary: The Language of Jive*.⁶⁸

The creation of the Lindy hop is traditionally traced to a dance marathon on June 17, 1928, at the Manhattan Casino in New York City.⁶⁹ According to dance lore, during the 1928 dance marathon, a contestant named George “Shorty” Snowden improvised a version of the breakaway move during a short contest (Fig. 9).⁷⁰ Fox Movietone News was present to film the dance marathon and reporters from *The New York World* newspaper were on site as well. When asked what this new step was, Snowden replied that he was doing “the Lindy.”⁷¹ Snowden was, of course, referencing Charles Lindbergh’s machine age feat of flying solo across the Atlantic in 1927.⁷² While the term “Lindy hop” may very well have been coined that evening, the dance itself had actually originated at the Savoy Ballroom in Harlem. Snowden, by his own admission, was

⁶⁷ Inez M. Cavanaugh, “Reminiscing in Tempo: Tricky Sam Goes Over the Great Times He Had with Duke, Bubber, Freddie Jenkins,” *Metronome* (February 1945): 17, 26.

⁶⁸ Giordano, 91.

⁶⁹ Giordano, 61. Dance marathons had been a fad in the U.S. since 1923 when a woman named Alma Cummings took the prize at the first such event at Audubon Ballroom in New York by dancing for 27 hours. In concert with the infamous 1896 Supreme Court decision of *Plessy v. Ferguson*, by 1915, most U.S. cities had “whites-only” laws on the books prohibiting the intermingling of European Americans and African Americans in dance halls. The 1928 dance marathon, however, was not segregated.

⁷⁰ “Short contests” were side competitions within the larger dance marathons wherein audience members would offer five or ten dollars to the best of the remaining couples for a head-to-head dance-off to one song.

⁷¹ Stearns and Stearns, 315-316.

⁷² This anecdote of the coining of the term “Lindy hop” may be apocryphal. See Dinerstein, 252; and Terry Monaghan, “Did Lindbergh Really ‘Lindy Hop’ the Atlantic?” *Jazz, Jump and Jive* (April-May 1999): 7-13.

improvising on steps that had been developed at the Savoy. Speaking of his Lindy hop improvisation at the 1928 dance marathon, Snowden commented, “I was really doing the regular steps, just like we did them at the Savoy, several of us, only maybe a little faster.”⁷³ Speed of execution underlies both swing music and the popular new dance that accompanied it. Speed was also an important aspect of the machine age. And what was a more important marker of the machine age than man’s triumph over the skies?

The reference to Lindbergh’s transatlantic flight in the naming of the Lindy hop would have been especially relevant to Snowden’s contemporaries. The name had strong currency in the popular culture of the era. Lindbergh’s flight symbolized modernity through technological progress. To associate dancing, which is essentially a body in motion, with machine age optimism was provocative for those who imagined that the dawning of the epoch of mechanization would necessarily precipitate the purging of the human body from the processes of production. The Lindy hop’s association with Lindbergh’s flight placed the human body on par with the airplane and added nuance to the traditional conception of the relationship between the modern body and the modern machine in the first half of the twentieth century. Joel Dinerstein asserts “Americans used dance to reclaim the human body as a site of joy and *human* power, of athletic and aesthetic display.”⁷⁴ Foregrounding the body in the machine age was a rebellious act. Whether swing dance actually assuaged the techno-paranoia that quickly followed machine age optimism is beside the point. What is important for the purposes of this essay is that swing dance offered a *human-centered* way to express machine age aesthetics through the speed, power, and precision of the frenetic “jitterbugs.”

⁷³ Stearns and Stearns, 316.

⁷⁴ Dinerstein, 253. (Dinerstein’s emphasis)

The two distinguishing features of the jitterbug were the breakaway and the aerial. The breakaway was an improvisational, independent, and spontaneous element of the dance. Aerials or air steps were lifts and flips that required the feet of one or both dance partners to leave the ground. The breakaway, or releasing of the partner to improvise in an open position, was an element first seen in a dance called the Texas Tommy from the initial decade of the twentieth century. Originating in the South, the Texas Tommy became well known regionally on the cabaret stages of San Francisco's Barbary Coast. The dance gained mainstream popularity when it was included in Leubrie Hill's production of *Darktown Follies*, which premiered in Washington, DC, in 1911, moved to Harlem's Lafayette Theater in 1913, and continued on to Broadway in 1915. Marshall and Jean Stearns note the importance of the Texas Tommy as a precursor to the Lindy hop:

This is the earliest example that we have found in the vernacular of a couple-dance incorporating, as did the Lindy fifteen or more years later, the breakaway, or the temporary and energetic separating of partners—a distinctly unwaltzlike and non-European maneuver.⁷⁵

The fact that this “maneuver” was located outside of the European tradition is an important point that underscores the “Americanness” that was invested in these social dances at the time. Willie Covan, a Los Angeles dancer, recalled a much closer relationship between the Lindy hop and the Texas Tommy, remarking, “The Texas Tommy had a different first step than the Lindy, or Jitterbug...that's all.”⁷⁶

The primary origin stories for the creation of the first aerial step date this innovation to the mid-1930s. Marshall and Jean Stearns tell a story involving Leon James and Albert Minns based on recollections by the two dancers. In June of 1937, as

⁷⁵ Stearns and Stearns, 129.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 128.

the story goes, James was considered to be the King of the Savoy and Minns was just a young upstart. At that time, the custom in the “Cat’s Corner” (the northeast corner of the Savoy where the elect danced and sat) was that everyone would wait for the “King” to arrive and then each couple “starting with the scrubs and working up to the King” would dance.⁷⁷ No one was supposed to follow the King. Instead, the dancers would take a break, out of respect. Seventeen-year-old Minns decided to breach etiquette that night. So, after the King had danced, Minns pulled his partner onto the floor and began showing off some air steps that were completely new.⁷⁸ According to the Stearns, “A few air steps had been popping up in 1936,” but this June night in 1937 was the clear transitional moment between the old guard (Snowden and James) who disapproved of the air steps and the young upstarts who “[got] the Lindy off the ground.”⁷⁹

While the evolution of air steps surely involved many dancers experimenting on dance floors over time, most dance scholars agree that Frankie Manning originated and performed the first “official” air step with his partner, Frieda Washington (Fig. 10). The general consensus is that the aerial was introduced during a dance contest at the Savoy Ballroom in Harlem in spring 1936.⁸⁰ Shorty Snowden and his partner Big Bea had developed a back-to-back finale move where one partner would lift the other partner onto his or her back and walk off the floor in this manner. Prior to the dance contest, Manning decided to top Shorty and Big Bea by creating a variation on their signature “carry off” move. Manning and Washington practiced linking their arms back-to-back, just as Shorty and Big Bea, but instead of a small lift, Manning flipped Washington completely

⁷⁷ Stearns and Stearns, 326.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 322, 326-327.

⁷⁹ Both quotes from Stearns and Stearns, 326.

⁸⁰ Giordano, 89.

over his head so that she landed in front and facing him. When the Saturday of the dance contest finally arrived, they had perfected the “over-the-back.” That night, Manning and Washington nervously took the floor after Shorty and Big Bea. They did their typical floor steps, then as a finale they introduced the air step that they had been working on for the past two weeks and according to Manning:

When Frieda landed, for one second, it seemed like everyone in the audience caught their breath...Then all of a sudden, the house *erupted!* Everyone jumped up and started stomping, clapping, hollering, and grabbing each other saying, “Did you see that?” “What the heck did he just do?” “He threw that girl over his head!” Folks were just carrying on. It was turmoil!⁸¹

In his 2007 autobiography, Manning is very humble and straightforward about the fact that many dancers contributed to the development of the “aerial” style of Lindy hopping, giving credit to those who came before him and others who invented air steps after he and Washington introduced the first one.

Whether one believes Minns or Manning, the stories concur on one important point, which is that the birth of air steps occurred at the Savoy Ballroom. When the Lindy took to the air, the promise of its name was fulfilled. From the moment George “Shorty” Snowden coined the phrase “Lindy hop” to describe the fast-paced steps that he was performing in 1928, the dance has had a natural association with flight. In the introduction to Frankie Manning’s autobiography, Cynthia Millman described the celebrated dancer’s distinctive contributions to the Lindy hop in terms of flight:

By bending forward diagonally from the hips when he danced, Frankie transformed the upright ballroom posture of the earliest swing dances into a more energized stance that simulated a sense of flight. When he and his partner introduced Savoy Ballroom patrons to the first Lindy air step, he heightened the

⁸¹ Frankie Manning and Cynthia R. Millman, *Frankie Manning: Ambassador of Lindy Hop* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Temple University Press, 2007), 100. (Manning’s emphasis)

excitement of Lindy hop performances with gravity-defying, acrobatic movements.⁸²

With the lift off of the Lindy hop, two schools developed—those who were wedded to the floor version of the dance such as Snowden and those who performed the aerial version such as Manning.

In the mid-1920s, a study conducted by the Advisory Dance Hall Committee and sponsored by the New York City Recreation Committee attested to the popularity of social dancing. The study found that the number of licensed dance halls in New York City had increased forty percent from 1920. Attendance at the more than 230 Manhattan dance halls was assessed at over 122,000 people per week in 1924. This translated to more than 6.1 million people per year.⁸³ The Savoy Ballroom, or “The Home of Happy Feet” as it was billed, opened in Harlem on March 12, 1926 (Fig. 11). It was possibly the first and certainly one of the few integrated dance halls in the United States at this time. Encompassing a city block, the Savoy had a capacity of more than 5,000 dancers. It was open seven days a week plus matinees on the weekends. Two bands were always present—one playing while the other rested—so that there was never a break in the music.⁸⁴ As Stowe describes it, “Visitors to the Savoy walked up two flights of stairs, coming into a large, low-ceilinged room; the dance floor was 100 yards wide and 30 yards long, framed by a long bar selling beer and wine, a row of booths, a section of tables, and the bandstand.”⁸⁵ Those who were fortunate enough to experience the Savoy during its heyday described it as a magical place (Fig. 12). Dancer Leon James remembered, “My first impression was that I had stepped into a different world. I had

⁸² Ibid., 12.

⁸³ Giordano, 65.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 108.

⁸⁵ Stowe, 20.

been to other ballrooms, but this was different—much bigger, more glamour, real *class*.”⁸⁶ This was exactly the atmosphere that Charles Buchanan and Moe Gale were seeking to create when they opened their ballroom in Harlem. With the Savoy, they hoped to rival the Roseland in downtown Manhattan and other popular dance palaces of the time.⁸⁷ This unique venue for the “hottest” jazz bands and jitterbug dancers of the time operated as a dance hall for over three decades and hosted over 250 big bands, including those of Chick Webb (leader of one of the house bands), Cab Calloway, Benny Goodman, and Duke Ellington. The consistently low price of admission belied the caliber of talent on the bandstand and the dance floor every night. It also helped to keep business steady even through the Depression years.⁸⁸

Just as African American musicians created jazz music by melding elements from many different musical styles, African American dancers adapted movements from a variety of older dances such as the Charleston, the black bottom, and the Texas Tommy to create the Lindy hop. All of these dances originated in black America and all of these dances were appropriated by white America—their ties to African American cultural sources cut. Inevitably, they were eventually held up as representative of the quintessential “American” spirit—“white American” by default. In the history of American cultural forms, especially music and dance, the specifically African American origins have been elided or “white-washed.” Carl Van Vechten took note of this tendency in a 1930 essay.

Nearly all the dancing now to be seen in our musical shows is of Negro origin, but both critics and public are so ignorant of this fact that the production of a new

⁸⁶ Leon James interview quoted in Stearns and Stearns, 321. (Emphasis from Stearns and Stearns)

⁸⁷ Barbara Engelbrecht, “Swinging at the Savoy,” *Dance Research Journal: Popular Dance in Black America* 15, no. 2 (Spring 1983): 3.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 5-6.

Negro revue is an excuse for the revival of the hoary old lament that it is pity the Negro can't create anything for himself, that he is obliged to imitate the white man's revues. This...has been the history of the Cake-Walk, the Bunny Hug, the Turkey Trot, the Charleston, and the Black Bottom. It will probably be the history of the Lindy Hop.⁸⁹

Van Vechten's prediction about the Lindy hop proved accurate. In his *Jitterbugs* series, Johnson celebrated the specifically African American origins of the jitterbug in an attempt to counter the process of appropriation described by Van Vechten. Johnson had finally come home and was painting and drawing African American culture as he saw it first hand in Harlem. He was restoring the under-painting beneath a whitewashed African American cultural form.

Johnson's jitterbugging couples with their varying skin tones of brown, tan, and ochre bear little resemblance to the jitterbugs that *Life* magazine decided to use on its cover on August 23, 1943, when it declared that the Lindy hop was "a true national folk dance" (Fig. 13).⁹⁰ The brief text that accompanied the photographs by Gjon Mili mentions an African American role in the history of the Lindy hop: "In its early days the Lindy flourished only in [the] lower strata of society. Negroes were its creators and principal exponents."⁹¹ But, one can hardly say that *Life* is celebrating the role of the African American dance tradition or giving full credit to it as a sophisticated means of expression. The tone of the text reaches its apex of condescension when the writer proposes an "evolutionary cycle" for the Lindy hop that implicitly denigrates the African American contribution: "first the rhythmic, primitive folk dance, sprung from the spontaneous responses of humble people to musical inspiration; then the social dance,

⁸⁹ Carl Van Vechten, "The Lindy Hop" in *The Dance Writings of Carl Van Vechten*, ed. Paul Padgette (New York: Dance Horizons, 1974), 38-39.

⁹⁰ "The Lindy Hop," *Life* (August 23, 1943): 95.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 96.

popular with all classes and defined by fixed and basic patterns; and finally the classic form, far removed from proletarian origins and ornamented with complex flowery figures attainable only by those who spend years in their practice...The Lindy Hop is now in the second phase.”⁹²

With this photographic montage in the pages of one of the most popular magazines of the time, the Lindy hop had finally arrived in the mainstream consciousness (Fig. 14). But, the two African American dancers, Leon James and Willa Mae Ricker, who were photographed for the spread in *Life*, were relegated to the interior of the magazine at the end of the article (Fig. 15). Despite the fact that they are demonstrating the more dynamic air steps that represented the defining characteristic of the Lindy hop, James and Ricker remain in the shadow of their white counterparts (Stanley Catron and Kaye Popp). It is the white dancers who are prominently displayed on the cover and throughout the photographic narrative, as if to say, “*this* is the face of America’s true national folk dance.” As a representation of American cultural production, the *Jitterbugs* offered a remedy to the common veiling of the African American roots of American folk traditions. While Johnson may not have consciously intended to create a symbol of the multifarious nature of American culture, his portrayal of the jitterbug would have carried a certain symbolic charge as it circulated among audiences at the time. His African American dancers metaphorically broke the boundaries of their frames in a swirl of colors and angles, fracturing the illusion of a homogenous Americanness and proclaiming their right to a piece of the nation’s history.

⁹² Ibid., 100.

Chapter Two: A Shift in Subject Matter and Style

Upon their arrival in New York in late fall of 1938, William H. Johnson and his wife Holcha Krake rented a small apartment in Greenwich Village at 27 West 15th Street and the artist set about finding employment. He contacted Evelyn Brown, the Assistant Director of the Harmon Foundation, to ask for assistance in securing a job with the local Federal Arts Project of the Works Progress Administration (WPA/FAP). On May 26, 1939, Johnson received his assignment from the WPA to teach art at the Harlem Community Art Center. The Center was located at 290 Lenox Avenue a few blocks down from the Savoy Ballroom. Johnson likely visited the Savoy during this period to observe the finest Lindy hoppers in action in preparation for his *Jitterbugs* series. As Kenneth Rodgers noted in a recent exhibition catalogue devoted to Johnson, “The tradition of pictures showing dancers had few precedents among Harlem Renaissance artists by the time Johnson painted this series. Winold Reiss and Aaron Douglas had done illustrations during the twenties and thirties of dancers, but there was no source of direct inspiration for Johnson other than the dance halls themselves.”⁹³

Perhaps it was the unbridled physicality of the dance that drew Johnson to this subject. Friends and acquaintances of the artist consistently noted Johnson’s athleticism and grace (Fig. 16). The machine-like speed and precision with which the jitterbugs executed their intricate steps must have inspired Johnson to try to capture this frenetic movement on paper and canvas. Certainly, Johnson was drawn to the dance because of its African American roots—a point that he emphasized by portraying all of his jitterbugs as African American. But, what would be the best way to represent this subject? What

⁹³ Kenneth G. Rodgers, *William H. Johnson: Revisiting an African American Modernist* (Durham, North Carolina: North Carolina Central University Art Museum, 2006), 106.

style could speak to the modern and traditional qualities embedded in this national dance in particular, and the American character in general? The convergence of modern machine aesthetics and African American traditions within this wildly popular dance offered an ideal metaphor for the paradoxical nature of American national identity.

Prior to 1938, when depicting the human figure in his work, Johnson chose portraiture as his mode. Although some African American portraits were included in his portfolio, the majority of his portraits were of the Danes amongst whom he lived. After he relocated to the United States, Johnson depicted mostly African American figures in his art. Significantly, he depicted “types”: street musicians, farmers, soldiers, and jitterbugs. This period was one of the most productive and innovative phases of his artistic career. According to Richard Powell, the more than 100 drawings that the artist executed around 1939 while at the Harlem Community Art Center demonstrate “real changes in Johnson’s overall artistic approach.”⁹⁴ These changes were due to several strands of stylistic development, which coalesced in Johnson’s *Jitterbugs* series of paintings, drawing, and prints executed between 1940 and 1942.

Johnson’s observations of the modern form of caricature practiced by Miguel Covarrubias and others directly influenced his move toward articulating a figure’s essence using an economy of line and an exaggeration of form. Johnson also retained an appreciation for the comic strips that he had read and copied as a young boy growing up in Florence, South Carolina. The serial mode that he adopted in his *Jitterbugs* series is highly reminiscent of the sequential quality of comic strips. In a Harmon Foundation brochure, Johnson was quoted as saying, “I began copying the humorous drawings in our newspapers...And the joy I derived from these may without a doubt be ascribed to the

⁹⁴ Powell, *Homecoming*, 125.

way we primitive people always adore caricatures.”⁹⁵ Johnson’s tendency to label himself as a “primitive” and his complex sense of what constituted the primitive—complicated by certain essentialist comments like the one above—will be discussed later in this paper. For now, an examination of the formal qualities of the *Jitterbugs* will help us understand the shift in Johnson’s style at the end of the 1930s.

As a young art student, Johnson initially had considered a career as a cartoonist. Family members in Florence remembered that Johnson taught himself to draw by copying the comic strip *Maggie and Jiggs*.⁹⁶ At the National Academy of Design (NAD) in New York in the early to mid-1920s, he absorbed the academic tradition, first drawing from plaster casts and then moving to life drawing classes. Johnson excelled in fine arts genres such as still life painting—as his many honors and awards from this period attest. Importantly, Charles Webster Hawthorne’s teachings at NAD and at the Cape Cod School of Art deeply influenced Johnson. Hawthorne’s philosophy, which privileged expressive color over rational draftsmanship, was at odds with the conservative tenets of NAD. Nonetheless, Johnson absorbed his favorite teacher’s affinity for the vibrating canvases of Vincent Van Gogh and Chaim Soutine and the two men developed a lasting friendship. In his final year at NAD, when Johnson lost the competition for the Pulitzer Traveling Scholarship, Hawthorne raised the funds to send Johnson to Paris to study. While abroad, Johnson’s style started to diverge from the principles of his early academic training as he concentrated his efforts on painting the landscapes of southern France, Scandinavia, and northern Africa in a lyrical and expressionistic style. To a slightly lesser degree, he also directed his creative energies towards portraiture, capturing the

⁹⁵ Brochure, container 77, Harmon Foundation Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, District of Columbia.

⁹⁶ Rodgers, 11.

likenesses of the fishermen and other inhabitants of his adopted Danish hometown of Kerteminde (Fig. 17-20). In these portraits, one can see the seeds of Johnson's mature style of the late 1930s and 40s.

In the years leading up to his move back to the United States, Johnson's style had been evolving. Incrementally, he moved from a tactile, fleshy approach to a spindly, flatter one in his portraiture. It can be argued that Johnson consciously shifted his style and choice of subject matter in response to the main criticism of his work in American circles—that he was too reliant on European models. In a 1930 review, William Auerbach-Levy stated, “His [Johnson's] latest work shows a distinct breakaway from his American training but is too much influenced by the French moderns. When he emerges from this phase, there is a great promise that he will do distinctive work of his own.”⁹⁷ The full title of this review, “Negro Painters Imitate Whites: Exhibition of Prize-Winning Artists Shows Them Held Down by Conventions; Greatest Need Is Free Expression of Racial Feeling, Says Artist-Teacher,” reflected the assumption that there was some sort of essential racial quality that African American artists should express in their work. It also reflected the pressure that African American artists felt from the critical establishment to strive for some sort of racial authenticity in their art.

This pressure is evident in several letters that Johnson wrote to Mary Beattie Brady, the Harmon Foundation's Executive Director, prior to his return to the United States. Johnson was growing impatient with the tendency of the art market to pigeonhole the work of African American artists as “authentic, racial” expressions and the Harmon Foundation's seeming complicity with this trend. In one letter, he states, “I see from your

⁹⁷ William Auerbach-Levy, “Negro Painters Imitate Whites: Exhibition of Prize-Winning Artists Shows Them Held Down by Conventions; Greatest Need Is Free Expression of Racial Feeling, Says Artist-Teacher,” *New York World* (January 5, 1930): 1M.

catalogue [that] so many of your Negro painter[s] have paintings in American Museums, colleges, etc. Why not...sell my paintings as well? Perhaps I am not [a] local enough Negro painter?”⁹⁸ In a second correspondence, Johnson accuses Brady and the Foundation of judging the work of African American artists on a racial basis alone, “Perhaps you are not interested in my exhibition, because it is not negroid enough—colored.”⁹⁹ The artist’s frustration is palpable in this correspondence. Likely, it was one of the factors in the development of his new style and subject matter.

In the critical discourse of the time, as Johnson accurately sensed, “racial authenticity” was an overriding factor in the characterization of the art of African Americans. Critics were concerned with identifying the “primal” and “authentic” expressions of African American cultural production as an antidote to the repressed, artificial, and overly rational expressions of European-based culture. Living in Europe and working in an expressionist mode that owed more to European models than to American antecedents at a time when American critics were concerned with answering the question, “what is ‘American’ in American art?” put Johnson at a distinct disadvantage in the American art market. In this context, Johnson’s experimentation with a new mode of expression can be understood as a personal exploration that was informed by discussions of the time centered on creating art that was “authentically American” as well as “racially authentic.”

Precisely at the moment when he returned to his homeland, Johnson arrived at the flat, geometric style of unmodulated planes of color that scholars associate with the apex

⁹⁸ William H. Johnson to Mary Beattie Brady, September 24, 1937, container 77, Harmon Foundation Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, District of Columbia.

⁹⁹ William H. Johnson to Mary Beattie Brady, February 25, 1938, container 77, Harmon Foundation Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, District of Columbia.

and penultimate chapter of Johnson's career. Critics at the time characterized Johnson's new style as "setting forth...ideas in what [seems to be] an authentic Negro idiom."¹⁰⁰ Certainly, this was an aspect of Johnson's shift in style and content, but it was also part of a larger project about defining Americanness for himself and his viewers. With the *Jitterbugs* series, Johnson attempted to create an iconic portrait of modern American bodies in motion that was evocative of the machine age while he simultaneously revealed the African American roots of American cultural forms. With *Jitterbugs*, Johnson posited that the modern American body was not white by default and that a representation of a new type of modern body could speak to an expanded, more inclusive concept of Americanness.

Modern Caricature

While Johnson almost certainly derived his inspiration for the *Jitterbugs* from the dance halls themselves, as noted above, it is not entirely true that they were his only source of inspiration. Modern caricature was a rich resource for Johnson. Hyperion Press published Al Hirschfeld's drawings of the denizens of Harlem in 1941 around the same time that Johnson was creating his *Jitterbugs* series. Titled *Harlem as Seen by Hirschfeld*, the book included a drawing of a couple dancing the Lindy hop (Fig. 21).¹⁰¹ In 1927, a collection of Miguel Covarrubias' gouaches and drawings was published as the book *Negro Drawings*. These drawings likely influenced Johnson's representations of dancers and café patrons. In his indispensable monograph on William H. Johnson,

¹⁰⁰ Howard Devree, "A Reviewer's Notebook: Brief Comments on Some of the Recently Opened Shows in the Galleries," *The New York Times* (May 2, 1943): 8.

¹⁰¹ This volume was revised and republished as Al Hirschfeld, *Hirschfeld's Harlem* (New York: Glenn Young Books, 2004).

Richard Powell articulates the fluidity with which Johnson's portraits navigated the blurred line between modern portraiture and caricature:

The thin line that separated pure caricature from modern portraiture was stretched by Johnson, just as it was brought into question by such expressionists as Kokoschka, Soutine, and others. Johnson's preoccupation with caricature in Denmark came into sharp focus with a series of portraits done between 1931 and 1933.¹⁰²

Here, Powell refers to portraits such as *Young Dane*, *Portrait of Jesper Anderson*, and *Old Salt, Denmark*, all dated to around 1931-32 (Fig. 17, 19, 20). It is in these piercing portrayals that one first glimpses the seeds for Johnson's later stylistic shift and concentration on the human form—and more precisely, the human character brought into focus through the vividly concise manipulation of line and form.

Modern American caricature evolved in the hands of artists such as Miguel Covarrubias, William Auerbach-Levy, Al Frueh, and Al Hirschfeld in the first three decades of the twentieth century. These modern artists utilized caricature less as a derisive or satirical mode of expression, than as a way to capture—with wit and incisive line—the essence of a person.¹⁰³ Both friends and critics noticed the affinity that Johnson's art had with caricature. Helen Harriton recalled that, "He painted a picture of my mother, and one of our daughter...both in that almost caricature-like style—not flattering—it's true—but I liked them."¹⁰⁴ Early recognition of this quality in Johnson's work came while the artist was still residing in Europe. In 1930, an American critic asserted, "His [Johnson's] bold splashings of pea greens and coffee browns upon

¹⁰² Powell, *Homecoming*, 79.

¹⁰³ I was greatly aided in this definition of "modern caricature" by Wendy Reeves' exhibition catalogue, *Celebrity Caricature in America*, which examines specifically the development of modern caricature alongside the rise of the "mass media-generated celebrity industry." Wendy Reeves, *Celebrity Caricature in America* (New Haven, Connecticut: National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution in association with Yale University Press, 1998), 3-4.

¹⁰⁴ Helen Harriton to Mary Beattie Brady, September 30, 1956, container 77, Harmon Foundation Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, District of Columbia.

canvases labeled 'landscape' and *the unlovely but humorous caricatures in his portraits* may mean that he is blazing a new trail in art or that he is in a fair way to lose himself in wayside jungles; only time and the mature judgment of art lovers will determine”¹⁰⁵

Johnson's street musicians, jitterbugs, and café patrons from approximately a decade later affirm that he was indeed “blazing a new trail.” A *New York Herald Tribune* review of Johnson's 1943 solo exhibition organized by then gallery assistant, Betty Parsons, at the Wakefield Gallery and Bookshop declares, “The display contains many delectable *character studies*, not the least personal and decorative of which are pictures of jitterbugs, street musicians and like subjects. Johnson's color is strong and his designing exuberant.”¹⁰⁶ As his contemporaries noted, Johnson was working in the spirit of modern caricature.

Unlike conventional caricature, however, Johnson's intent with the *Jitterbugs* series was to capture the essence of a dance rather than a particular person; and, not just any dance, but a dance that seemed at the time to define the dawning of an energetic, urban, technological era, while also tracing its roots deep into African American culture. The jitterbug's exuberant steps, in a way, were equivalent to the cocky angle of George Gershwin's distinctive cigar in William Auerbach-Levy's caricature of the musician (Fig. 22), or the plucky gait of song-and-dance man George M. Cohan by Al Frueh (Fig. 23). As Wendy Reeves explains in her book, *Celebrity Caricature in America*, the latter caricature, “seems to express the exuberance, theatricality, and wit of the age.”¹⁰⁷

Through its high-flying, energetic, angular forms, Johnson's *Jitterbugs* series expressed

¹⁰⁵ “Is William H. Johnson, Negro Prize Winner, Blazing a New Trail?,” *Art Digest* 4 (January 15, 1930): 13. Emphasis added. The author of this article is quoting an unnamed critic from the *Herald Tribune*.

¹⁰⁶ Carlyle Burrows, “Notes and Comments on Events in Art: Negro Life,” *The New York Herald Tribune* (May 2, 1943): 5. Emphasis added.

¹⁰⁷ Reeves, 13.

the optimism as well as the anxiety of an age in which technology had lifted humankind into the heavens, sped up the pace of industrial production and urban life, and consequently left many people feeling disjointed and fragmented. With the *Jitterbugs*, Johnson, like the modern caricaturists, sought to capture the essence of this age—the age of swing and the machine—through a distortion of line and a distillation of form and color to their most elemental state.¹⁰⁸

In examining the caricature-like aspects of Johnson's *Jitterbugs* and other works from this period, the influence of Miguel Covarrubias is significant. From a glance at Johnson's scrapbooks, we know that he was aware of Covarrubias' work. The artist clipped and kept a series of undated Covarrubias illustrations of a production of *Carmen Jones* (Fig. 24). Covarrubias illustrated five scenes of the opera, four of which appear in Johnson's scrapbooks. By his own measure, Covarrubias did not regard his representations of African Americans as "caricatures" in the traditional sense. In a 1927 article, he is quoted as saying, "I don't consider my Negro drawings caricatures. Most of them are studies. They are—well—they are drawings. A caricature is the exaggerated character of an individual drawn with a satirical purpose. The Negro drawings are done from a more serious point of view."¹⁰⁹ In this statement, Covarrubias defined the modern sense of caricature that was emerging in his work and the work of his contemporaries—a form of representation that blurred the line between modern portraiture and caricature. There is no reason to doubt the artist's stated intentions as less than genuine; however, the visual evidence suggests that while Covarrubias had a great deal of respect for his

¹⁰⁸ Parallel to Johnson's attempt to capture the essence of an era in caricaturing the energy and exuberance of the jitterbug is Al Hirschfeld's drawing of a couple doing the Lindy hop in Hirschfeld, *Hirschfeld's Harlem*, 32-33.

¹⁰⁹ Miguel Covarrubias quoted in Marcet Haldeman-Julius, "Miguel Covarrubias," *Haldeman-Julius Quarterly* (January 1927): 62.

African American subjects, he could not completely escape the legacy of stereotypical renderings of the African American figure.

While some scholars have defended Covarrubias' drawings of African Americans, arguing that they are without condescension and maintaining that "The artist's sympathy with his subjects is always clear," even a cursory perusal of some of these works reveals that Covarrubias did flirt with racist stereotypes.¹¹⁰ His depictions are sensitively rendered when he treats his subjects as individuals (Fig. 25-26), but there is the occasional reversion to stereotypical typing, especially in his drawings of dancers (Fig. 27-28). These interpretations—which repeat the bulging eyes, exaggerated thick lips, and full-toothed grins of nineteenth-century racist caricatures of African Americans—smack of minstrelsy. They do not exhibit the same respect and sensitivity of design as the two former illustrations of individuals.

In a quotation from a work in Covarrubias' collection of gouaches and drawings published in 1927 as *Negro Drawings*, Johnson appears to correct for Covarrubias' more insensitive tendencies. In his book, Covarrubias depicted a fashionably dressed couple seated at a café table (Fig. 29). A little over a decade later, Johnson painted a similar couple seated at a café table (Fig. 30). Both images highlight the stylish attire of the sitters down to the impeccably pressed suits and elegant hats and in both works the forms of the figures are elongated. Even though they take much the same pose as Johnson's figures, Covarrubias' couple exhibits a different dynamic. Covarrubias gave his male subject an exaggerated thick-lipped, toothy grin, which thoughtlessly evoked the racist imagery that had circulated in the visual culture of the United States since the days of slavery. Johnson's café couple, however, sits close together and looks coolly and

¹¹⁰ Terence Grieder, "The Divided World of Miguel Covarrubias," *Americas* (May 1971): 24.

impassively on at their surroundings. Johnson gave his figures a certain dignity lacking in Covarrubias' couple. If indeed, Johnson was alluding to Covarrubias' earlier image, he was taking an important step in reworking this representation. He created a new aesthetic for the "New Negro"—one that did not depend on stereotypes such as the "Zip Coon" or the "Mammy." Whether one can read this far into Johnson's intent or not is debatable. What is certain is that Johnson took a keen interest in Covarrubias' work, collecting clippings of his caricatures, and responding to his *Negro Drawings* series. Furthermore, one can discern Johnson's interest in modern caricature by examining the visual evidence of his *Jitterbugs* series. Just as Covarrubias exaggerated the gestures and bodies of his dancers with improbably extended lines and flexed limbs, Johnson utilized formal distortion to achieve a sense of the lively, graceful, and angular motions of the jitterbugs.

The "Strip" Aesthetic

At first glance, Johnson's stylistic shift may seem abrupt; however, the trajectory of his formal experimentation in the years leading up to his move from his adoptive country back to the country of his birth charts a fairly steady course. In addition to the influence of modern caricature, a major characteristic of Johnson's "new" style is a "stripped down" quality in the delineation of form. As mentioned above, people, objects, and landscape are collapsed into one or two planes and are defined with flat blocks of color and black outlines. Another characteristic of this new aesthetic is an affinity with comic strips. The serial quality of the *Jitterbugs* images recalls the manner in which comic strips unfold and is an inventive way to "animate" the dancers in his images.

Johnson's searing portraits of the residents of Kerteminde (Fig. 17-20) were completed after he and his wife married in spring 1930 and settled in Denmark. Evidence of Johnson's interest in and facility with portraiture can be found even earlier in the portraits that Johnson completed in the United State while visiting from November 1929 to May 1930 (Fig. 31-33). These portraits from the U.S. and Denmark mark a transitional point in Johnson's style, because he continued to mold the faces of his sitters with shadow, but he did it less subtly than before with broad brushed areas of unblended color. Viewed in a progression, these portraits demonstrate that he reduced the figure to its essential form until he achieved a two-dimensional effect. In the oil, *Jim* from 1930 (Fig. 31), it is evident that Johnson has moved away from academic conventions of portraiture as seen in his *Self-Portrait* from circa 1923-1926 (Fig. 34). The background is divided into two halves, which meet directly at the center of the sitter. This is certainly a compositional device, as Powell has observed, but could also be interpreted as an indication of the boy's state of flux between adolescence and adulthood. The bifurcation of the background also serves to add a modicum of depth to the portrait, indicating a corner of the room that recedes into space. Johnson has expertly modeled the broad, high forehead and fleshy cheeks of the young sitter. In addition, the young man's jacket and button-up shirt give the impression of being worn, of moving with the sitter. Despite the blocked in color and dark outlining in places, this portrait maintains an impression of three-dimensional presence.

In other portraits of this period, the inclination to flatten space almost wins out, as in the watercolor, *Young Dane* of circa 1931-1932 (Fig. 17). Like *Jim*, *Young Dane* is a painting of a young boy, but the style of this painting has moved further along the

spectrum of spatial compression. The heavily outlined eyes of the sitter seem to psychologically and physically flatten his gaze and the schematic rendering of his blue jacket and white shirt almost push this element of the image into the realm of Johnson's later works (of the late 1930s and early 1940s). It is finally with works such as *Girl in a Red Dress* of circa 1936 (Fig. 18) and *Self-Portrait with Pipe* of circa 1937 (Fig. 35) that Johnson fully embraced this "stripped down" approach to the human form, but it was a transformation that required years of experimentation.

The stripping down of formal elements is one sense of the "strip aesthetic." A second sense of this term is the influence of comic strips. At the time that Johnson's *Jitterbugs* and other works in this new style were being exhibited, a handful of critics noticed and commented on the affinity that they had with cartoons and comic strips.¹¹¹ Emily Genauer's thoughtful observations in the *New York World-Telegram* are especially pertinent:

He [Johnson] is a Negro, and his subjects are always Negroes. And yet, as depicted by him, they're devoid of any consciousness of race. They're not particularly emphasized as people at all, but rather as elements in his design. He distorts and stylizes them and then organizes them into flat, shadowless compositions built on a linear pattern. They're almost like cartoons in approach, but they're put together with an extremely original flair for design, with a pervading sense of movement and rhythm, and with a cadence which seems to suggest Negro spirituals somewhat.¹¹²

This seriality of the *Jitterbugs* is reminiscent of the format and installment of comic strips. While Johnson completed several groups of images during this period that can be categorized as groups (the Fighters for Freedom series, the African American soldiers series, and the rural South series), none are as "serial" in nature as the *Jitterbugs* series.

¹¹¹ Emily Genauer, "Latest Johnson Works Placed on Exhibition," *The New York World-Telegram* (May 1, 1943): 9.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 9.

The images are not only linked by the same title and content, they are linked by movement.

Visual Analysis

Jitterbugs (I) (Fig. 1) demonstrates two conventions that Johnson used throughout the series: vibrant colors and the grid or checkerboard pattern. The vermilion in the female jitterbug's lips is picked up in the color of her nails, bracelets, and shoe ornaments. The male jitterbug sports a canary yellow cap, which complements the piping on his partner's purple romper. She wears a blouse in a slightly paler shade of yellow. The vivid blues of the man's pants and woman's elaborate shoes is reflected in the lining of the cap and the romper. The bright orange of the male dancer's shoes stands out against the green dance floor. Throughout the series, Johnson used the rhyming of colors and shapes to mirror the implied rhythmic pulse of the swing music. The same reds, yellows, blues, greens, and oranges appear repeatedly in the rest of the series (Fig. 2-5) in varying tones. Depending on the medium used, they vary from deep to light; much as one might imagine the tonal quality of the accompanying music would fluctuate. The artist's use of saturated colors recalls Emil Nolde's dramatic use of color in his paintings such as *Dance Around the Golden Calf* of 1910 and *Dancers* of 1920. Johnson's expressionistic palette developed as he was exposed to the work of European expressionists such as Nolde.

The second constant in Johnson's series is the checkerboard or grid design. In *Jitterbugs (I)*, the man wears a checked shirt, a motif that is repeated in the grid-like pattern of the man's suit in *Jitterbugs (II)* and the suit coat and dance floor in *Jitterbugs*

(V). This motif occurs time and again in the work of the European modernists from the cubists to the members of the Bauhaus school.¹¹³ Pablo Picasso, Juan Gris, Bela Kadar, Sándor Bortnyik, and Piet Mondrian, are just a few of the European moderns who utilized the grid in their works. Grids, within which one could place checkerboards as a subset, function differently in, for instance, Gris' *Checkerboard and Playing Cards* of 1915 and Mondrian's *Composition with Yellow, Blue, and Red* of 1921, yet the motif undoubtedly signifies modernity for these artists. Certainly, the grid signals the grid system of the city planner's modern urban space. The cold rationality of the grid could also be seen as a counterpoint to the emotion and irrationality of expressionism—two distinct modernist modes. In a provocative essay in *October*, Rosalind Krauss asserted that the grid functions spatially and temporally “to declare the modernity of modern art.”¹¹⁴ Spatially, the grid points to the flatness of the picture plane, its essential nature in the Greenbergian sense. Temporally, the singularity of the grid and its absence from the history of art before the modern era designates all other modes as “past.” As Krauss posited, “In the spatial sense, the grid states the autonomy of the realm of art. Flattened, geometricized, ordered, it is antinatural, antimimetic, antireal...In the temporal dimension, the grid is an emblem of modernity by being just that: the form that is ubiquitous in the art of our century, while appearing nowhere, nowhere at all, in the art of the last one.”¹¹⁵ Regardless of how the grid functions, for Johnson the grid signified modernity and his use of it in the *Jitterbugs* series was an act of willful modernism, a display of facility and worldliness parading underneath a studied primitivism—a mask of naïvety.

¹¹³ Many thanks to Dr. Steven A. Mansbach for his invaluable insights into the symbol of the grid/checkerboard in the work of European modernists.

¹¹⁴ Rosalind Krauss, “Grids,” *October* 9 (Summer 1979): 50.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 50 & 52.

In his *Jitterbugs* series, Johnson depicted four distinct dance positions. Most likely observed on the dance floor of the Savoy Ballroom, these Lindy hop steps include three floor steps and one aerial move. As mentioned in chapter one, the two distinguishing characteristics of the Lindy hop are the breakaway and the high-flying air steps. Johnson captured the Lindy's distinctive breakaway step in *Jitterbugs (I)*. This step is a highly spontaneous element of the Lindy, wherein the partners temporarily release their hold on each other and dance apart to showcase their improvisational skills. It is difficult to ascertain if the moment depicted in *Jitterbugs (I)* is the moment that the couple separates or unites. In *Jitterbugs (I)*, the dancers appear to be transitioning from a closed position to an open one. Nonetheless, the step that Johnson illustrates is almost certainly this distinctive jitterbug move, first developed in southern jook joints and then on west coast dance floors and stages by African American dancers as part of the Texas Tommy. The breakaway in the Lindy hop could be compared to "the break" in Jazz music as Albert Murray defines it in his brief essay, "Improvisation and the Creative Process." Understanding the jazz break, according to Murray, is essential to understanding improvisation. Murray describes the break thusly:

Another device for blues idiom statement is the 'break,' which is a disruption of the normal cadence of a piece of music. The 'break' is a device which is used quite often and always has to do with the framework in which improvisation takes place...The break is an extremely important device both from the structural point of view and from its implications. It is precisely this disjuncture which is the moment of truth. It is on the break that you 'do your thing.' The moment of greatest jeopardy is your moment of greatest opportunity.¹¹⁶

¹¹⁶ Albert Murray, "Improvisation and the Creative Process," in *The Jazz Cadence of American Culture*, ed. Robert G. O'Meally (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 112.

As represented by Johnson, the breakaway underscores another defining characteristic of modern social dancing, popularized by the Charleston in the 1920s—dancing side by side as opposed to in the traditional closed position where the couple remained face to face.

The other distinctive jitterbug innovation was the aerial or the air step. Johnson included such a step in *Jitterbugs (V)*. The maneuver that the two dancers are performing in *Jitterbugs (V)* is a back flip. The gentleman supports his female partner with his right hand at her waist and uses his left hand to propel her legs up and over. The woman jitterbug has pushed off of the ground with her legs and flung her torso and arms back anticipating the full rotation backwards. After completing the three-sixty, she will land slightly to the right of her partner facing him. Johnson's depiction suspends the dancers in the moment of release, somewhere between contained energy, flowing momentum, and exhilarating explosion. The horns fly into the air in concert with the woman, their bells expanding as if to signal the growing fever pitch of the music in response to the dancers' breathtaking aerials. While the woman's hat implausibly has stayed in place up to this point in her acrobatics, a second topper that rests unclaimed in the background hints at the yellow hat's inevitable trajectory. Johnson also prioritized the fashions of the dancing couples in his *Jitterbugs* series. The jaunty hats in the primary colors of red, yellow, and blue; the smart checked and hatched sport coats and suits; the chic dresses; and the delightfully ornamented platforms and pumps all compete with the energy of the dance steps and the musical instruments for prominence.

Another step that Johnson concentrated on in this series is a closed slide wherein the female dancer melts into her male partner who supports her as she alternates her legs in a lunging position (Fig. 2). In *Jitterbugs (II)*, Johnson uses some of the same formal

devices as in *Jitterbugs (I)*: the bifurcated background, the slatted dance floor, and a fashionably dressed dancing couple. In *Jitterbugs (II)*, as in *Jitterbugs (III)*, *(IV)*, and *(V)*, he includes a fourth element in the form of musical instruments which float disembodied from their human players in the background. These jazz instruments serve as emblems of the swinging music that accompanied the jitterbug dancers. The instruments—trumpets, clarinet, and snare and bass drums—literally mirror the angles of the dancers' linked bodies following the lines of the torsos, arms and legs as they bob in space to the imagined rhythm. The red circle of the female dancer's hat is repeated in the red circles of the trumpets' bell interiors while the identical yellow triangles echoing the yellow cross hatching of the man's suit and representing the woman's bosom and backside create a patchwork or puzzle impression, interlocking her with her partner. In this way, an unbroken formal conversation occurs between the dancers and the instruments.

As mentioned in chapter one, swing music was inextricably linked to dance. In a swing song recorded by Billie Holiday in 1938, she sang: "Rhythm has its seasons, summer, fall, and spring,...but for seven silly reasons someone pulled the string, and they started dancing; now they call it Swing."¹¹⁷ Glenn Miller also tied swing music to dance when he defined swing as "a solidity and compactness of attack by which the rhythm instruments combine with the others to create within the listeners the desire to dance."¹¹⁸ The simultaneous development and unbreakable bond between swing music and dance was an important concept for the musicians of the time. It was also an indispensable idea for Johnson as he created his *Jitterbugs* series—evidenced in his inclusion of brass and

¹¹⁷ Billie Holiday lyrics quoted in Stowe, 6.

¹¹⁸ Glenn Miller quoted in Gordon Wright, "Swing, Swing, Oh Beautiful Swing!," *Metronome* 52 (February 1936): 19, 33.

rhythm instruments in these images. The jitterbugging couples and the musical instruments are intertwined in his compositions, mirroring each other's angles and movements and creating a harmonious flow of formal elements.

The brass and wind instruments act as extensions of the dancers' appendages and underscore the inseparable bond between the music and the dance. Indeed, many dancers and musicians at the time spoke of the "conversations" between the jitterbugs and the swing bands and the atmosphere of mutual inspiration. According to Duke Ellington:

Dancing is very important to people who play music with a beat. I think that people who don't dance, or who never did dance, don't really understand the beat...I know musicians who don't and never did dance, and they have difficulty communicating.¹¹⁹

In the documentary film, *The Call of the Jitterbug*, Dizzy Gillespie remembers that sometimes the dancers inspired the musicians and sometimes it was the other way around.¹²⁰ Jazz musician Jimmy Crawford recalls that, "Dancers influenced the music a whole lot in those days...In ballrooms, where there's dancing like I was raised on, when everybody is giving to the beat, and just moving, and the house is bouncing—that inspires you to play."¹²¹ These and countless other comments from dancers and musicians alike serve as a reminder of the collaborative dynamic between the Lindy hoppers and the big swing bands. The aural quality of Johnson's *Jitterbugs*—the prominence of the instruments in some of the images and how they interact in the movement of the dance and the bodies of the dancers—underscores the interwoven nature of swing music and the Lindy hop.

¹¹⁹ Duke Ellington quoted in Stanley Dance, *The World of Duke Ellington*, (1970; reprint, New York: Da Capo Press, 2000), 13.

¹²⁰ Dizzy Gillespie interviewed in *The Call of the Jitterbug*.

¹²¹ Jimmy Crawford quoted in Stanley Dance, *The World of Swing*, (1974; reprint, New York: Da Capo Press, 2001), 124.

For his *Jitterbugs (III)* images, Johnson chose to portray a couple who is executing a dip. The woman's face is partially obscured by her arm as her partner tips her into a graceful backbend.¹²² The slatted dance floor is retained in the *Jitterbugs (III)* images. In this iteration, the stripes of the floor are echoed in the planks of the background wall, the stripes of the xylophone, the stacked lines of the hat, and the straps of the woman's platform shoes. The triangles that form the soles of her shoes are mirrored in the tips of his shoes, the wedges of space defined by both dancers' legs, and the sharp angles of their elbows, his backside, and her left breast. The semi-circle delineating the female dancer's right breast repeats the curved forms of the trumpets' bells, which are fragmented by the dancers' limbs. These "dialogues" between the formal elements in this image parallel the creative interactions between dancers and musicians, described by Gillespie and Crawford above, which occurred on a regular basis. They add up to an exhilarating rhythm of patterns and shapes that is suggestive of the "hot" beat (and off-beat) of jazz music.

In *Jitterbugs (II)* and *(III)*, Johnson started to reduce the instruments, his dancers, and their environment to the most elemental shapes: circles, triangles, and rectangles. He takes this exercise to its logical conclusion in *Jitterbugs (IV)* when he distills the figures of the jitterbugging couple into their most essential forms, creating an interlocking puzzle of basic shapes. Johnson takes the couple from *Jitterbugs (III)* as his starting point. The horns in the background have been reduced to circles and rectangles and the drum has become an arc. This reduction has served to completely flatten the picture so that the

¹²² Interestingly, in all but one of the poses that Johnson depicted (i.e., the breakaway in *Jitterbugs (I)*), the female dancer's eyes are either fully or partially covered—by a hat in *Jitterbugs (II)* and by her right arm in *Jitterbugs (III)* and *(V)*. Perhaps this device was used to further obscure the individuality of the dancers with an insistence on depicting a type rather than a portrait.

instruments appear to be on the same plane as and even part of the shapes delineating the bodies of the dancers. The blue hat with yellow trim is discernable as three rectangles perched on a head that has been reduced to a triangle. Even as Johnson transformed human bodies into planes of color, he never completely did away with figuration by abstracting the dancing couple beyond recognition. Their bodies are fractured into geometric shapes, but still remain decipherable as two intertwined people. This reveals a deliberate aim of the artist to strip down the elements of his figural studies to their barest elements, while retaining the human element.

The positions of the dancers can be read as dance steps within one dance. If the sequence were somehow animated, the steps would unfold in the viewer's mind as a narrative. This was an innovative solution to the "problem" of the static quality of the media. In the *Jitterbugs* series Johnson found a way to represent motion by using seriality. He had always incorporated movement into his canvases with deft manipulation of line, but this was his first attempt to animate the canvas using multiplicity. It also seems relevant to note the artist's own movements, or the performative aspect of the act of painting for Johnson. A family member recalled Holcha Krake's description of the first time she watched Johnson paint. "She said it was on the beach, that Johnson was painting in the plein-aire [sic], in a bobbing, swaying, almost "shadow-boxing" manner. That Holcha watched him for a long time before she approached him" (Fig. 36).¹²³ Residents of Kerteminde also remembered that Johnson "danced" when he painted.¹²⁴ One can imagine Johnson moving energetically yet

¹²³ Interview with Johanna Voll Steffenson (Erna Voll's granddaughter), November 3, 1984, Richard J. Powell Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, District of Columbia.

¹²⁴ Powell, *Homecoming*, 232.

gracefully around a canvas channeling the spirit of the Savoy as he painted the dynamic dancers.

Chapter Three: *Jitterbugs* in the Machine Age

In 1918, William H. Johnson left his hometown of Florence, South Carolina, bound for his Uncle Willie Smoot's home in Harlem. Like many of his fellow travelers during the Great Migration, Johnson reached the North via train. Johnson's uncle worked as a Pullman porter on the New York City-Miami train route and his sporadic visits to his sister's home during Johnson's childhood likely sparked in his young nephew an interest in experiencing the world outside of Florence. Growing up in "The Gate City" of Florence, headquarters for the Atlantic Coast Line Railroad Company and home to a major railroad station along the Wilmington-Charleston route, Johnson would have certainly viewed the locomotive as an agent of mobility—both literally and figuratively (Fig. 37).¹²⁵

At the turn of the twentieth century, the United States was in the midst of two major historical shifts: urbanization and industrialization. From 1890 to 1914, European immigrants flocked to the United States at rates of over one million per year and most settled in cities.¹²⁶ Significant population shifts occurred within the country as well. Johnson was among those African Americans who left the South during the Great Migration of the early to mid-twentieth century in search of greater economic and educational opportunity, and with the hope of encountering less racism in northern cities.

By the time Johnson created his *Jitterbugs* series, signs of industrialization were ubiquitous. Skyscrapers rose majestically out of the urban landscape like monoliths, locomotives crisscrossed the nation, and automobiles were commonplace. Ninety percent of American households had electricity in 1940, compared to about a quarter percent of

¹²⁵ Powell, *Homecoming*, 1-9.

¹²⁶ Giordano, 7.

homes just twenty-three years earlier. In that same time period automobile ownership more than tripled.¹²⁷ According to art historian Richard Guy Wilson, “The machine age encompassed the vast new skyscraper city, with its transportation systems compacted one on top of the other, and the new horizontal city composed of filling stations, drive-ins, and superhighways. Even human beings were viewed as machines.”¹²⁸ The mass production of goods combined with the burgeoning advertising industry fuelled American consumerism and manufactured not only the new commodities of convenience, but the desire for them as well. Every aspect of people’s lives was touched by machines and products fabricated by machines. This dependence bred an attitude towards machines that was characterized by both hope and apprehension.

The Great Depression exacerbated fears about human dependence on machines and World War I revealed the dark side of technological progress. But even prior to the stock market crash, technological pessimism was on the rise. In 1919, Waldo Frank wrote, “The average New Yorker is caught in a Machine. He whirls along, he is dizzy, he is helpless. If he resists, the Machine will mangle him. If he does not resist, it will daze him first with its glittering reiteration, so that when the mangling comes he is past knowing.”¹²⁹ The “Machine” of modern urban life was a menacing figure for many Americans. In Frank’s dramatic narrative, the “Machine” was both hypnotizing and harsh in its triumph over human will. Bodies and souls were sucked in and pried apart. The mechanization of war was another site of anxiety for the American people. As Wilson observes, “While the history of war is in one sense the history of the mechanics of killing, this war [World War I]—with its horrific casualties and the way the machine not simply

¹²⁷ Wilson, 25-26.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 25.

¹²⁹ Waldo Frank, *Our America* (1919; reprint, New York: AMS Press, 1972), 172.

killed, but chewed up, disfigured, and so tore apart the human body that often it could neither be found nor identified—made apparent a new level of destruction.”¹³⁰

According to Joel Dinerstein, the big band music and social dance of the 1930s played a cathartic and curative role. These cultural forms enacted a ritual that assured people of their dominance over machines. Dinerstein theorizes that by assimilating machine aesthetics into the performance and then ritually conquering them by bending the rhythms to their will, musicians and dancers quelled societal apprehension about over-mechanization. Frank grimly laid out the dilemma of Americans in the grips of the machine age by evoking what he characterized as the more vigorous and wholesome era of the American pioneer. “The pioneer was vital and fluent. A living impulse made him. The New Yorker of today is stiff and slack: he has been fathered by steel and broken by it.”¹³¹ Dinerstein argues that African American musicians and dancers were subverting this kind of bleak view of the “Machine’s” vitiating role in the life of modern Americans.

In much the same way, Johnson’s *Jitterbugs* were a visual essay on the connection between the aesthetics of the machine and the aesthetics of human bodies in motion, Johnson was pointing to the ubiquity of machines in the modern urban landscape while asserting the primacy of the body over the machine. The “humanized machine aesthetics” of the Lindy hop identified by Dinerstein are embedded in Johnson’s concept of the modern body.¹³² Furthermore, the Lindy hop embodied not only the modern technological accomplishment of flight that was its namesake, but also the modern symbols of the locomotive and the skyscraper. These symbols enact two major trajectories in modern America—the hope for a brighter future that brought African

¹³⁰ Wilson, 27.

¹³¹ Frank, 174.

¹³² Dinerstein, 12.

Americans (Johnson included) from the small towns of the South to the big cities of the North via locomotive; and the aspiration of a young country to build, steel frame upon steel frame, the secular cathedrals which would proclaim its autonomy as a growing industrial power. By presenting the jitterbugging couple as a modern American icon, the human equivalent to the iconic skyscrapers of Georgia O’Keeffe and John Marin, Johnson created a humanized symbol that could stand for African American identity within a larger national American identity.

“Steady Locomotive Power”

Since the days of slavery, the locomotive had been a symbol in African American communities for escape and freedom; the symbolic appellation of Harriet Tubman’s Underground Railroad being its most famous deployment. As John Giggie observes:

Blacks appropriated images of train travel to frame expressions of deliverance. It was a practice begun during slavery, particularly in the upper-South region, when bondsmen dreamed of riding the underground railroad north toward freedom. Similarly, northern white and black abolitionists sometimes delivered their antislavery message by representing the political drive toward emancipation as a train ride.¹³³

Giggie also makes an important connection between the railroad, deliverance from bondage, and technological progress. “Ex-slaves commonly symbolized spiritual and political journeys as railroad journeys...Indeed, they often underwent moments of religious transformation when taking the train or envisioning doing so, revealing the railroad to be a modern locus where African American dreams of deliverance intersected

¹³³ John M. Giggie, “‘When Jesus Handed Me a Ticket’: Images of Railroad Travel and Spiritual Transformations among African Americans, 1865-1917,” in *The Visual Culture of American Religions*, ed. David Morgan and Sally Promey (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 2001), 252.

with technology.”¹³⁴ For African Americans the railroad symbolized both freedom and deliverance from oppression, and the urbanization and industrialization of the country as it served to transport rural Americans to urban areas and connect economic centers to each other.

The importance of the train (symbolically and literally) was also heard in the sounds of jazz. Speaking about Duke Ellington and the sounds of the train in an interview with Robert O’Meally in 1992, jazz musician Wynton Marsalis said:

Well, Ellington loved trains. Trains represent a certain type of freedom: they represent communication, and they represent the ability to get from one place to another... When I was a boy growing up in Canton, Louisiana, we lived right down the street from the railroad tracks, and all night I could hear the trains. The trains have a romantic sound... there’s just something about the sound of it; it’s just percussive, it sounds like a machine, it sounds like something human, it has a voice in it.¹³⁵

Marsalis described the sounds of the train, which became integrated into the rhythms of jazz, as both machine and human. In this seeming contradiction, he identified the role that jazz musicians played in humanizing the increasingly overwhelming mechanization of everyday life by creating a human expression of machine sounds. In a sense, jazz musicians “tamed” the machine and eased America’s anxieties about excessive mechanization by incorporating machine aesthetics into their art form.¹³⁶

¹³⁴ Ibid., 249.

¹³⁵ Wynton Marsalis and Robert G. O’Meally, “Duke Ellington: ‘Music Like a Big Hot Pot of Good Gumbo,’” in O’Meally, *The Jazz Cadence of American Culture*, 152.

¹³⁶ This is the major thrust of Joel Dinerstein’s argument in his book, *Swinging the Machine*. In his own words, “The process by which African Americans stylized machine rhythms and aesthetics through inquiry, experiment, and social experience is the launching point of this work.” My thesis is indebted to Dinerstein’s concept of the “humanized machine aesthetics” of swing music and its associated dances. In reframing William H. Johnson as an American modernist engaged in the discourse surrounding national identity during the interwar years, I have applied Dinerstein’s ideas about African Americans’ integration of machine aesthetics into the cultural forms of music and dance to the visual arts—namely, to Johnson’s *Jitterbugs* series.

By simply giving visual form to jazz, the Lindy hop was already tangentially connected to the machine aesthetics of the music. In addition, just as swing musicians such as Duke Ellington incorporated the mechanical sounds of the train into their compositions, the jitterbugs alluded to the movement of the train on its tracks in their dances. As Dinerstein explains, “The lindy hop integrated the relentless power of machines by mixing speed, precision, and flow with human stamina and self-expression to display the partnered expression of dynamic control.”¹³⁷ He also notes that African American dance forms typically mirrored labor or work routines. By this rationale, if machines became part of the “work-scape,” then they would naturally be integrated by African American communities into their dances.¹³⁸ But, why was this necessary? Dinerstein asserts that the reason was the same as that of the jazz musicians—to exercise control over one’s environment by incorporating the intimidating elements of life (machine worship, over-mechanization, the irrelevance of humans in the machine age) into an art form that could be ritually mastered.

Albert Murray has written about the “railroad onomatopoeia” that he argues underlies all African American cultural forms:

The blues is percussive statement. It is the talking drum that has become the old, down-home American locomotive with its chugging pistons, its ambiguous and ambivalent bell, and its signifying, insinuating, tall tale-telling whistle. The definitive characteristic of Afro-U.S. life style is its tendency to refine all movement, indeed all human activity, in the direction of dance beat elegance.¹³⁹

To be sure, the “dance beat elegance” that Murray speaks of is present in the jitterbug.

This dance, with its smooth yet intricate footwork and its low-flowing quality, evokes the

¹³⁷ Dinerstein, 255.

¹³⁸ Ibid., 264.

¹³⁹ Murray, “Improvisation and the Creative Process,” in O’Meally *The Jazz Cadence of American Culture*, 113.

steady chugging of a train on its tracks. The graceful execution of dance steps set to the manic beat of swing music required that the jitterbugs lower their center of gravity. This perpetual, horizontal motion balanced the ecstatic moments of flight as the dancers launched their partners into breathtaking air steps. The contrasting verticality of the dance suggested the technology of flight and the sweeping lines and lofty heights of the new skyscrapers. Both grounded and airborne, the jitterbug reflected the seemingly limitless spatial and technological expansion of the urban grid, rail systems, modular skyscrapers, and mechanical flight. Dinerstein succinctly articulates the excitement of these opposing forces in the jitterbug, “The contrast of the vertical accents of the air steps with the smooth, continuous horizontal motion was thrilling, a mix of skyscraper aspiration and steady locomotive power.”¹⁴⁰

Johnson undoubtedly made this connection between dance and mechanization. Busby Berkeley’s Hollywood spectacles, starting in the 1930s, incorporated “motorized stages and platforms for dances that recalled machines” and the choreographer often composed his dancers into machine-like arrangements.¹⁴¹ Additionally, Johnson’s work, *Chain Gang* of circa 1939, was exhibited at the 1939-1940 New York World’s Fair; the same World’s Fair at which the Savoy had a popular dance pavilion featuring Whitey’s Lindy Hoppers. The fair’s title, *World of Tomorrow*, aptly sums up its organizers’ machine age aspirations. Thus, precisely before Johnson created his *Jitterbugs* series, he experienced the convergence of the Lindy hop with a nationally sanctioned celebration of machine age optimism, reinforcing his triangulation of the jitterbug, the machine age, and national identity.

¹⁴⁰ Dinerstein, 267.

¹⁴¹ Wilson, 36.

In his *Jitterbugs* series, Johnson depicted a lowered center of gravity in the flexed knees and crouched positions of the dancing couples in *Jitterbugs (I), (II), (III), and (IV)*. This grounded stance allowed for the dancers to execute the steps of the Lindy hop faster in a gliding motion instead of the bobbing movement that would have resulted from a more upright orientation. The patterning of the striped dance floors in these four *Jitterbugs* paintings, while describing the actual slatted floors of venues such as the Savoy, are also suggestive of railroad tracks. With this symbolic element, Johnson referred to the low flowing energy of the dancers' movements by evoking the steady momentum of a train on its tracks. The locomotive-like movements of the dancers combined with the rail-like treatment of the floor invite the viewer to interpret these images as multivalent, referring to the literal jitterbug as well as to the figural railroad—two quintessentially American symbols of modernity. In this juxtaposition, the humanity of bodies in motion tempers the machinery of techno-progress.

I have already touched upon the choreographed interaction between the dancers in *Jitterbugs (II), (III), (IV), and (V)* and the musical instruments which dance behind and around the couples. The instruments mirror the movements of the dancers, forming angles and arcs that complement the lines of their bodies. As suggested above, this device is used to underscore the collaborative relationship between music and dance. It also serves to visually connect the dancers to the instruments in a sort of hybrid modern body of flesh and metal. In *Jitterbugs (II)*, the collapsed space of the image aligns all of the pictorial elements along a single plane. Thus, to the eye of the viewer, the clarinet merges with the clasped hands of the dancers, essentially becoming an extension of their arms. This fusion of human body and inanimate object is especially apparent in

Jitterbugs (III) where the round shapes of the trumpets' bells seem to add wheels to the legs of the female dancer. The overall effect of this formal synthesis is that her body, itself, seems to be transforming into a train on "The Track" of the Savoy Ballroom.¹⁴²

"Skyscraper Aspirations"

With its soaring height and imposing structure, the skyscraper was one of the most conspicuous symbols of modernity in the urban landscape. Reacting to the monumental architecture of New York, French modernist architect Le Corbusier rhapsodized, "Jazz, like the skyscrapers, is an event...Manhattan is hot jazz in stone and steel."¹⁴³ For Le Corbusier, as well as other European observers, skyscrapers and jazz were the quintessential American expression. This holds true for many artists who were attempting to define what was uniquely "American" about America. The canonical early moderns who clustered around Alfred Stieglitz in the first decades of the twentieth century were actively searching for a visual answer to this question. The colossal skyscrapers of New York offered an obvious subject, but the solutions varied greatly. Georgia O'Keeffe's *Radiator Building—Night, New York* of 1927 (Fig. 38) stands in marked contrast to John Marin's *Woolworth Building* series of 1912-13 (Fig. 39-42). Both works have attained iconic status as expressions of American identity through the depiction of the nation's most distinctive homegrown architecture. O'Keeffe produced an image of solid steel and glass dramatically lit in the inky night. Her image evokes the power and confidence of the machine age (while simultaneously poking fun at Stieglitz's

¹⁴² The Savoy regulars referred to this famous institution as "The Track," either in reference to the space's former life as a dog racing track or as a metaphor for the competitions that took place on the floor between dancing couples. See Stearns and Stearns, 316.

¹⁴³ Le Corbusier, *When the Cathedrals Were White*, trans. Francis E. Hyslop, Jr. (1947; reprint, New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1964), 161.

anti-scientific, anti-materialist ideals). Marin's series of watercolors present an entirely different aesthetic—a more humanized machine aesthetic that aligns his skyscrapers with William H. Johnson's jitterbugs.

The *Woolworth Building* series was produced during the construction of the skyscraper, and Marin's interpretation of the building highlights the process of its construction. The ever-changing structure of Marin's Woolworth Buildings also evokes the hyperkinetic quality of modern urban life. The building seems to sway and twist, dissolving from representational to near abstraction in the course of the series. These “dancing” forms share an affinity with Johnson's *Jitterbugs* series. Indeed, Marin titled an etching of the Woolworth Building from this period, *Woolworth Building (The Dance)* (Fig. 43). The twirling bodies of *Jitterbugs (V)* recall the spiraling vectors of *Woolworth No. 32* of 1913 (Fig. 42), driving home the association between the high-flying aerial steps of the jitterbug and the soaring verticals of the skyscraper.

So, if the skyscraper was the preeminent icon of modernity, why would Johnson choose to paint jitterbugs, which though evocative of “skyscraper aspirations,” were still not literally skyscrapers? The answer lies in Dinerstein's concept of “humanized machine aesthetics.”¹⁴⁴ To make the skyscraper his symbol of modern America would have been for Johnson to choose “machine” over man. Always interested in the human form in his art, Johnson refused to eliminate humanity from his symbol of America as O'Keeffe and Marin had done in their skyscraper works. For Johnson, the answer to what is “American” about America was *Americans*. The drama of humans navigating the cacophonous, frenetic, modern world of the machine was the American experience of this age. Modern bodies in motion taming the speed and mechanical rhythms of hot jazz with

¹⁴⁴ Dinerstein, 290.

their controlled momentum and precise movements—these were the symbols of Johnson’s America. Johnson’s manifestation’s of the modern body in motion was a victory of humanity over excessive mechanization.

Johnson’s contemporary, photographer and filmmaker Paul Strand had called for this in 1922 when he wrote that mankind had devised “a new Trinity: God the Machine, Materialistic Empiricism the Son, and Science the Holy Ghost.” He went on to assert that “not only the new God but the whole Trinity must be humanized unless it in turn dehumanizes us.”¹⁴⁵ Charles Sheeler echoed something of this sentiment when he said that “Our factories are our substitutes for religious expression.”¹⁴⁶ But rather than offering a humanized symbol of modern America in his art, Sheeler depicted dehumanized environments such as *American Landscape* of 1930, and *Classic Landscape* of 1931. In these landscapes of modern America, the only hint of human activity comes from the puffs of smoke emanating from the lone smoke stacks. Although both Johnson and Sheeler were occupied with machine age themes, they approached them quite differently; one filtering the frenetic energy of the machine age through human bodies, and the other suggesting the diminished role of the human in the desolate mechanized environment.

“What is American about America?”: William H. Johnson Answers

As late as the 1950s, cultural critics were still preoccupied with this question of what constituted the American experience. In 1954, John A. Kouwenhoven listed twelve items that he felt were “distinctively American.” Items as seemingly disparate as the

¹⁴⁵ Paul Strand, “Photography and the New God,” *Broom* (November 3, 1922), 252, 257.

¹⁴⁶ Sheeler quoted in Constance Rourke, *Charles Sheeler, Artist in the American Tradition* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1939), 137.

skyscraper, jazz, and comic strips were included in this list.¹⁴⁷ According to Kouwenhoven, the quality that these items had in common—the quality that bound them together as characteristically American—was an unresolved quality, the fact that they were open systems concerned with “process rather than product.”¹⁴⁸ The steel frame construction of the skyscraper allowed for layer upon layer to be stacked without need for the resolution of such “Old World” architectural inventions as a cornice. Likewise, the serial nature of comic strips ensured that its characters could continue to exist in perpetuity. Jazz, as an improvisational art form, was built around the idea of variation on a theme, which could go on as long as the musicians could “riff” on the central composition.¹⁴⁹

The jitterbug could very easily be added to this list. As the physical embodiment of the jazz music of the swing era, the jitterbug was tied to the music and had no beginning or end. The jitterbug has been described as “a synthesis of all the other popular dances of Afro-American origin” and the vitality of the dance depended on the improvisation and addition of new dance steps—the kind of invention that led to the creation of air steps in the mid-1930s.¹⁵⁰ Thus, the jitterbug shares the unresolved quality that has been suggested as the criterion for “American-ness.” The difference between the jitterbug and the other items is that the dance is America in flesh and blood instead of steel and glass, newsprint and ink, or bars and notes. For Johnson, the jitterbug was the ideal symbol of modern America, because it was *human*—the antidote to a completely mechanized culture.

¹⁴⁷ John A. Kouwenhoven, “What is ‘American’ About America,” in O’Meally, *The Jazz Cadence of American Culture*, 124.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 133.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 125-133.

¹⁵⁰ Emery, 235.

The Depression era saw a spike in anxiety among workers regarding their possible displacement in the workforce by machines. Dinerstein notes that at the same historical moment that cultural critics began sensing an imbalance between humans and their machines, swing music and its associated dances were on the rise.¹⁵¹ Upon perceiving that there was a darker side of techno-progress and that humans were at risk of becoming slaves to their inventions, critic Lewis Mumford declared, “Our capacity to go beyond the machine rests upon the power to assimilate the machine.”¹⁵² The fast tempo of modern life required the pace of hot jazz and swing dance. Or visa versa, up-tempo jazz music and dance were reactions to the increasingly hectic pace of modern American life. Nineteenth-century Victorian bodies of the waltz were becoming twentieth-century bodies of the jitterbug. In Mumford’s estimation, to “assimilate the machine” was to assert control over a mechanized environment. Once they found themselves in a world of machines, “Americans wanted to see the machine mastered.”¹⁵³ And performing dances that evoked the speed and power of the machine age, Dinerstein asserts, was an attempt to do so.

Johnson’s *Jitterbugs*, as an emblem of America, posited an alternate machine age—one that imagined the possibility of “humanized machine aesthetics and reenergized modern bodies in dialogue with technological forces.”¹⁵⁴ In other words, Johnson’s image of the Lindy-hopping couple was a symbol that could represent an America that tempered the optimism and aspiration of technological progress with consideration for the flesh-and-blood agents of that progress. According to Dinerstein,

¹⁵¹ Dinerstein, 4.

¹⁵² Lewis Mumford, *Technics and Civilization* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1934), 363.

¹⁵³ Dinerstein, 12.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 290.

“Swing music and dance were participatory cultural forms that yoked then-assumed opposites together—the human and the machine—in a dance-hall ritual that helped dissipate the tensions of a technological society.”¹⁵⁵ Aesthetically then, the human body (at least, in motion) was not antithetical to the machine. When jitterbugging, the body performed humanized machine aesthetics, responding to the machine-like rhythms and sounds of jazz in a public display of mechanical mastery and reclamation of the body’s physicality.

Because he chose to depict African American dancers in his *Jitterbugs*, these bodies also represented a self-conscious future for America—one that acknowledged the contributions of African Americans to the cultural fabric of the country. Lewis Erenberg has observed, “Awareness of the African roots of black music may be widespread today, but in 1938 it was still uncommon.”¹⁵⁶ Johnson’s African American Lindy hoppers carried a fundamental message about the cultural history of the United States that most Americans at that time either were not aware of or refused to acknowledge. The variety of skin tones that Johnson gave his *Jitterbugs* speaks to Johnson’s aforementioned willingness to work against the grain of the conventional perceptions of race. By refusing to visually present the African American community as monolithic, Johnson was speaking to the rich multiplicity of identities within this population.

In *Painting the Musical City: Jazz and Cultural Identity in American Art, 1910-1940*, art historian Donna Cassidy explored a different kind of quest for visual representations of national cultural identity through jazz forms. In her essay on Arthur Dove and Stuart Davis, Cassidy asserts, “Dove’s and Davis’s efforts to paint jazz

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 316.

¹⁵⁶ Erenberg, 120.

participated in this music's transformation—its de-Africanization, its sanitation.”¹⁵⁷ In contrast to Johnson's project of reclaiming the African American roots of jazz dance, these early moderns were working in abstract styles that Cassidy claims contributed to the “whitewashing” of an African American cultural form. “Dove and Davis, like many of their contemporaries, abstracted and distanced jazz in ways that did not always remain true to the music's roots, though they were fruitful visually” (Fig. 44-45).¹⁵⁸ Cassidy compares these visual artists to musicians, such as Paul Whiteman, who co-opted a form of jazz that had been stripped of its roots and presented it as their own. They inflected their jazz canvases with the meanings that they felt characterized this musical form— industrial, mechanical, urban—and they omitted those that they did not feel were characteristic—human, rural. Then, they presented their abstracted paintings as examples of a national American identity. Whether intentional or not, they were presenting a white idea of jazz, not an American idea of jazz. Johnson's *Jitterbugs* worked against the blanket acceptance of this kind of blatant appropriation and “white-washing” of African American cultural forms. Dove and Davis “considered abstraction the appropriate means to represent modern America” and felt that jazz was “not amenable to illustration by traditional pictorial means”¹⁵⁹ Johnson, on the other hand, was concerned with recovering the African American roots of the swing era and re-imagining the face of America's “true national folk dance”: the Lindy hop.¹⁶⁰ To accomplish this, a representational mode was the natural choice. This did not keep him from experimenting with abstract forms, as one can see from *Jitterbugs (IV)*. Rather than working in some sort of manner derivative of

¹⁵⁷ Donna M. Cassidy, *Painting the Musical City: Jazz and Cultural Identity in American Art, 1910-1940* (Washington, District of Columbia: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1997), 80.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 114

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 107.

¹⁶⁰ “The Lindy Hop,” *Life* (August 23, 1943): 95.

academic models or ignorant of modernist innovations with abstraction, Johnson consciously and deliberately chose to foreground the modern American body as he conceived of it—as humanized machine in motion, originating in African American folk traditions and symbolizing American and African American modernity.

Conclusion

William H. Johnson embarked on several journeys in the fall of 1938. The first was physical: an Atlantic crossing from Denmark to New York City with his wife to escape the Nazi aggression that was bearing down on all of Europe. The second was psychological: a spiritual “homecoming” as Richard Powell termed it in his important monograph of the artist. The last was an artistic journey, during which Johnson shed the last vestiges of his academic training and began working fully in a new style informed by comic strips and modern caricature. I have attempted to define a “strip” aesthetic to describe this new direction in Johnson’s style. This term is multifaceted, encompassing a stripping away of formal elements to arrive at a two-dimensional, flattened, compressed space, and an affinity with comic strips, especially the serial nature of the medium. With his move to the strip aesthetic, Johnson truly was working at the artistic forefront alongside other American modernists such as Stuart Davis and Gerald Murphy. The fact that Johnson never abandoned figuration should not exclude him from the cannon of avant-garde modernists. With the *Jitterbugs* series, he succeeded carving out a place for the modern African American body in motion within the symbolic space of “Americanness.”

Johnson was concerned with creating a more human and a more inclusive symbol American identity. The dynamic movement of African American dancers performing the jitterbug was his solution. For the artist, the modern body in the machine age was a confluence of contained explosion, potential energy, and controlled momentum. It was fashionably dressed, it was exuberant, and it was African American. In this modern body, limbs and musical instruments fit together like cogs in a machine working together

toward the “skyscraper aspiration” of soaring air steps and the “steady locomotive power” of the breakaway. Joel Dinerstein has described machine age modernism as “the controlled power of machine aesthetics in the service of self-expression.”¹⁶¹ As I am content to let Johnson float in the interstices of artistic movements, and feel no need to enclose him in a neat classification such as “expressionist” or “Harlem Renaissance artist,” I propose instead to add another facet to his complex artistic character, that of machine age primitivist. Throughout this paper, I have used the words “primitivist” and “primitivism” to describe Johnson’s style. In bringing my thesis to a conclusion, I wish to elaborate on the meaning of “the primitive” for Johnson.

“Primitivism” is a term burdened by racist associations. Often used as the antipode of “the civilized,” the term “primitive” has been wielded in racist discourse to characterize persons of color as uncultured and anti-modern. Yet, it is undeniable that primitivism and modernism are inextricably linked. In search of “authentic” expressions in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, European moderns turned to the arts of African and Oceanic civilizations. It has been successfully argued that European appropriation of the arts of so-called primitive or marginalized societies formed the basis of transatlantic modernism in the twentieth century and that this formed a continuous feedback loop of influence: primitivism as filtered through modernism feeding into the work of artists of African descent and artists of European descent alike.¹⁶²

Johnson was an artist in the nexus of this complex system of influences, but his conception of “the primitive” was arguably more personal than that of his European peers. Despite the fact that he was well versed in European modernism, Johnson tended

¹⁶¹ Dinerstein, 319-320.

¹⁶² Sieglinde Lemke, *Primitivist Modernism: Black Culture and the Origins of Transatlantic Modernism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 4-5.

to downplay his worldliness. In a 1932 interview, the artist stated, “And even if I have studied for many years and all over the world, I have still been able to preserve the primitive in me...My aim is to express in a natural way what I feel, what is in me, both rhythmically and spiritually, all that which in time has been saved up in my family of primitiveness and tradition, and which is now concentrated in me.”¹⁶³ While Johnson’s inclination to link his race to the notion of “the primitive in me,” might lead one to deduce a streak of racial essentialism, his concept of the primitive was much more complex than this quote suggests. In his adopted Danish hometown of Kerteminde, Johnson captured the likenesses of the fishermen and the other inhabitants whom he described as possessing the admirable quality of primitiveness. “Primitives can be found all over the world,” Johnson remarked, “even in Kerteminde, where the fishermen, as human beings, have preserved the [essential] characteristics of their nature, people in whom there is an element of tradition.”¹⁶⁴ This more nuanced sense of the primitive was based not in racial categories, but rather in the idea of a primal connection to tradition. Johnson’s notions of the primitive differed from the European modernists such as Paul Gauguin or Pablo Picasso. As Richard Powell has noted:

Unlike the level of involvement of many modern painters and sculptors usually identified as being artistically conscious of Africa, Oceania, and the aboriginal Americas, Johnson’s commitment to primitivism was neither shallow nor temporary. His interest was a career-long pursuit...Moreover, in contrast to the identification of most artists who appropriated the forms and moods of non-Western artworks, Johnson’s African-American background and his assertive self-identification with other peoples of color set his primitivism apart from the standard examples and raised it to another level of discourse.¹⁶⁵

¹⁶³ Johnson quoted in a 1932 interview with a Danish newspaper in Powell, “In My Family of Primitiveness and Tradition,” 286.

¹⁶⁴ Johnson quoted in a 1932 interview with a Danish newspaper in Powell, *Homecoming*, 78.

¹⁶⁵ Powell, “In My Family of Primitiveness and Tradition,” 285.

Thus, in this rather lengthy digression on primitivism, I hope to suggest another way in which Johnson's *Jitterbugs*, and indeed, his entire oeuvre can be viewed.

Johnson's work unfolds as a career, a life, devoted to exploring different modes of primitivism, but his unique notion of primitiveness. From his early quaking, vividly hued, expressionist landscapes of France and Scandinavia to his impassive, mask-like portraits of his neighbors in Kerteminde, to his later mechanistic, intentionally naïve, folk-inflected depictions of jitterbugs and the denizens of Harlem, the one constant in Johnson's work is an attempt to reveal the underlying qualities of "primitiveness and tradition" in his vibrantly modern subjects.¹⁶⁶

With *Jitterbugs*, Johnson found a means to personify the machine age. In these works, mechanization and humanization are not antithetical, just as the primitive and the modern are not mutually exclusive. They are part of a push and pull that is parallel to the guidance of a good partner on the dance floor. Malcolm X described this phenomenon in his autobiography:

With poor partners, you feel their weight. They're slow and heavy. But with really good partners, all you need is just the push-pull suggestion. They guide nearly effortlessly, even off the floor and into the air, and your little solo maneuver is done on the floor before they land, when they join you, whirling, right in step.¹⁶⁷

As Johnson's *Jitterbugs* exemplify, mechanization and humanization do not have to be antithetical; they are opposing forces working in tandem, moving in step with each other.

Similarly, Johnson's *Jitterbugs* series gave visual form to the sentiment that American identity was not shaped by Euro-American culture alone, but owed a great

¹⁶⁶ Sieglinde Lemke makes a similar argument for Johnson's *Café* of circa 1939-1940. She brilliantly argues that Johnson succeeded in creating a primitivist-modern style that "signified" on Picasso's *The Frugal Repast* of 1904. Lemke, *Primitivist Modernism*, 52-56.

¹⁶⁷ Malcolm X with Alex Haley, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (1965; reprint, New York: Ballantine Books, 1992), 63.

(some would say its greatest) debt to African Americans. Only by acknowledging that American identity consisted of multifarious cultures could an artist ever hope to articulate “Americanness” in a faithful way. In creating the *Jitterbugs*, Johnson fulfilled Alain Locke’s hope that “after absorbing the new content of American life and experience, and after assimilating new patterns of art...the Negro may well become what some have predicted, the artist of American life.”¹⁶⁸

¹⁶⁸ Locke, 256, 258.

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