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Negotiating Primitivist Modernisms: Louis Armstrong, Robert Goffin, and the Transatlantic Jazz Debate[1](#)

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1“Dear Pal Goffin,” Louis Armstrong wrote to his Belgian acquaintance, the lawyer, hobby journalist, and jazz historian Robert Goffin, on July 19, 1944. “Man—I’ve been trying to get in touch with you [...]. Here’s another hundred dollars toward the five hundred. [...] So accept this hundred and I’ll send the other before a ‘Black Cat can ‘Lick his ‘*Bu’hind*’ haw haw haw...” (80). Sending Goffin a batch of money along with this playfully worded missive, Armstrong was hoping for quick results. He had written “four books of stories” about his life in the previous months and had sent them to his prospective Belgian amanuensis. Understandably, he was eager to read Goffin’s finished version of the manuscript and couldn’t wait to see his life story—for the second time after the heavily ghosted *Swing That Music* (1936)—in print. Goffin’s answers to Armstrong’s letters did not survive, but what did survive are the published texts that resulted from this transatlantic collaboration: the original French version *Louis Armstrong: Le Roi du Jazz* (1947) and the English version *Horn of Plenty*, translated by James Bezou and published in the US in the same year. What survived as well are large parts of Armstrong’s hand-written manuscript, which covers the jazz musician’s life between 1918 and 1931 and was published by Thomas Brothers as “The ‘Goffin Notebooks’” in *Louis Armstrong, in his Own Words* (1999).[2](#)

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2This essay will offer a series of contextualized comparative close readings of Armstrong’s manuscript, Goffin’s adaptation—which turned the manuscript into a biography—and Armstrong’s autobiographical responses to this biography.[3](#) This negotiation of Armstrong’s life story took place within a transatlantic debate about the history and meanings of jazz as an expression of American modernism, but it also stands in the context of what Sieglinde Lemke has called primitivist modernism in her book of the same title.[4](#) A major objective of this transatlantic debate was to gain discursive control over a music that expressed difficult notions of black agency, artistry, and racial affirmation at a time when massive socio-political and musical changes were occurring on both sides of the Atlantic.[5](#) In the United States, these changes involved the burgeoning African American struggle for civil rights that followed the so-called Double V campaign during World War II, which had indelibly connected the fight against fascism abroad with the fight against racism at home, and the heated arguments about the presumed commercial excesses of swing music, the potential political validity of the oncoming bebop (described as “the war come home” by Lott [“Double V” 246]), and the allegedly reactionary stance of revivalist jazz. In many ways, this was also a critical moment in jazz historiography, a moment in which many previous controversies concerning the cultural powers of jazz and its significances as a musical aesthetics very much different from European classic music clashed. I

cannot do justice to the complexities inherent in this clash of controversies in the context of my argument about the Goffin-Armstrong exchange here, but I do want to at least name the two book publications of the time that most immediately contextualize Goffin's *Horn of Plenty*: the Jewish jazz clarinetist Mezz Mezzrow's collaboratively written memoir *Really the Blues* (with Bernard Wolfe, published in 1946) and Rudi Blesh's 1946 study *Shining Trumpets: A History of Jazz*, both of which contain lengthy passages on Armstrong's apparent racial authenticity and essentialist assumptions about the racial roots of jazz.⁶

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3In Europe, where critics had been listening to and writing about jazz since the late 1910s, most Francophone jazz writing of the 1940s must be read against the violent excesses of fascism, the Nazi slandering of jazz as a degenerate art, and the propaganda view that jazz was noise produced by members of the inferior races.⁷ In Goffin's case, the Belgian authoritarian rule in the Congo as part of its colonial empire was a second subtext. Historians have documented a profound interest in colonial anthropology and ethnography, which resulted in colonial exhibitions and a permanent colonial museum by the end of the nineteenth century (see Couttenier), as well as a "colonial propensity to engineer the past in order to meet present political objectives," The will to "rewrite African historiography" (Fraiture 9) and the violent regional anti-colonial uprisings that led to the construction of *relégation* camps in the 1930s (cf. Yervasi 16) are additional factors that certainly colored Goffin's engagement with American jazz as the music of recently freed and musically unrestrained blacks.⁸ These issues are, however, only very rarely made explicit. They make themselves heard just briefly in the first chapter of Goffin's *Jazz: From the Congo to the Metropolitan* (1944), where Goffin states:

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The history of jazz has a social significance of which I am quite aware and which I am fond of stressing. At the very moment when America goes to war to defend the democratic spirit against the totalitarian challenge, it is fitting to remember that, in the last twenty years, jazz has done more to bring blacks and whites together than three amendments to the constitution have done in seventy-five. (1)⁹

4As these few words already indicate, the fascination with American jazz and its social significance emerged from an idealization of jazz as a quintessentially democratic (as opposed to dictatorial) and free (in opposition to repressive and persecuting) music. This idealization, as my analysis of Goffin's biography of Armstrong will illustrate, rests significantly on the construction of the black jazz musician as an especially gifted member of an oppressed but cohesive racial collective that has managed to carry its gifts—mainly music and dance—from the African Congo to the American Metropolis. As Hugues Panassié proposes in *The*

Real Jazz (1942), compared to white people,

the Negroes prove more gifted, and while the Negro masses themselves have an instinctive feeling for this music [i.e., jazz], white people approach it with resistance and approach it slowly. (21)

5Musical expression is very much racialized in statements such as this, which assert that specific musical styles belong to specific peoples. Panassié elaborates:

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What characterized the extraordinary creative flow produced by the Negroes at the beginning of the twentieth century was that it was spontaneous—unconscious of its novelty, untarnished by the slightest design. (22)[10](#)

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6As I argue elsewhere, it is exactly the *conscious* spontaneity of Armstrong's writings and the *conscious* design of his music that account for his complex position in jazz historiography and American cultural history (Stein, *Music is My Life*), but I believe that Panassié's remarks can be read against the horrors brought upon France and other European nations by a decidedly uncivilized and uncultured German dictatorship: "We must [...] say that in music primitive man has greater talent than civilized man" and that "[a]n excess of culture atrophies inspiration, and men crammed with culture tend too much to play tricks, to replace inspiration with lush technique under which one finds music stripped of real vitality" (21).[11](#) These are statements first and foremost about music, but their disavowal of modern culture and civilization is prominent enough to suggest a moment of political disillusion and resistance.

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7These transatlantic debates and discourses contextualize my analysis of Armstrong's and Goffin's collaboration. My starting assumption is that the ways in which Armstrong and Goffin negotiated divergent notions of primitivist modernism certainly relied on the long history of Francophone primitivism as it manifested itself in visions of the "noble savage" and "les choses Africaines" (think of Michel de Montaigne, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, or Guillaume Apollinaire). But, perhaps more substantially, they were also the result of a series of transatlantic misreadings that led to Goffin's rewriting of Armstrong's vernacular manuscript as a primitivist biography. These misreadings, I will argue, were (at least in part) the result of Armstrong's performative engagement with American discourses of blackface minstrelsy as well as Goffin's tendency to take these discourses at face value.[12](#) I believe that this kind of analysis is useful because it allows us to think of the construction of Armstrong's popular image as an

American jazz icon and entertainer less in terms of an exclusively American project and more in terms of the transatlantic collaboration that had, from the beginning, influenced the development of jazz criticism far more substantially than some critics are willing to acknowledge.¹³ As Ted Gioia indicates, the “[primitivist] mythology of jazz has extended its influences far beyond the area of historical research. It has come to shape the critical standards which define the art form” (47). Moreover, while *Horn of Plenty* was not the first book about Armstrong’s life—*Swing That Music* preceded it by about a decade—it was the major public narrative of his New Orleans childhood and his early successes as a jazz musician in the 1940s and thus marks an important point between the swing discourse of the musician’s first autobiography and the more nostalgic tone of his second autobiography, *Satchmo: My Life in New Orleans* (1954).

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8In the manuscript that served Goffin as the raw material for *Horn of Plenty* (i.e., “The ‘Goffin Notebooks’”), Armstrong focuses on personal anecdotes rather than larger historical events. Indebted to a vernacular practice of spontaneous storytelling, he frequently digresses from the basic storyline, relating off-color jokes and crude puns indicative of a humorous approach to public self-performance. Armstrong essentially expresses a flexible understanding of his anecdotal life narratives as momentary snapshots rather than a carefully composed and definitive autobiography. The voice of the autobiographer meanders through a maze of personal recollections; it is performative rather than carefully composed. One result of this performative approach to life writing is an unconventional orthography, which includes the idiosyncratic use of what have been called indexical markers and annotations: single and multiple apostrophes, single and multiple underscores, ellipses, dashes, occasional parentheses, and unorthodox capitalization.¹⁴

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9Goffin preserved the basic elements of Armstrong’s narrative, even though his chronology and geography are frequently questionable.¹⁵ He included almost all of the anecdotes and snatches of events that Armstrong relates in the “Notebooks.” This is important because it demonstrates the complicated mixture of biographical depiction and traces of autobiographical recollection (or self-representation) that characterizes *Horn of Plenty*. Yet Goffin edited out nearly all of Armstrong’s orthographic quirks. Apparently, he never took the musician’s writing style seriously; it seems that he simply did not believe that Armstrong’s colorful language and unorthodox orthography might have to tell us anything about his life or music (even though he later claimed he had done so out of respect for Armstrong’s authentic writing style¹⁶). About the manuscript itself he says nothing, and only once does he refer to Armstrong’s penmanship, calling the letters he wrote to fellow New Orleanian cornetist Joe Oliver “painfully scrawled

replies” (146). Armstrong, in turn, was obviously aware of what he must have thought of as Goffin’s superior writing skills, and he afforded his biographer with a maximum of editorial discretion. On May 7, 1944, he noted in a letter to Goffin:

There may be several spots that you might want to straighten out—or change around ... What ever you do about it is alright with me ... I am only doing as you told me ... To make it real—and write it just as it happened. (78)

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10This statement communicates a self-conscious understanding of the autobiographer’s tenuous position as a black autobiographer with little authorial repute: while the uneducated black Southern musician delivers the raw material, an accomplished white European like Goffin is responsible for polishing up a culturally viable final product. It would not be too far-fetched to read this communicative situation as emblematic of the larger socio-cultural and economic contexts that had shaped the production and reception of jazz since early decades of the twentieth century.[17](#)

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11While *Horn of Plenty* includes most of the events covered in Armstrong’s “Notebooks,” it nonetheless exerts substantial control over the musician’s life story. Goffin invents scenes and dialogue and turns Armstrong’s reminiscences into largely primitivist fare. This primitivism emerges from a perceived connection between jazz and “the torrid Congo”—references include “deep-voiced tomtoms,” “wild jungle dances” and “voodoo worship” (6)—and from an understanding of a racially inherent musical genius passed down from “father to son,” who are “writing in sweat and blood the heart-rending epic of [the African] race” (141). Apart from direct references to primitivist ideology—Goffin speaks of “primitive hearts” (136) and “the primitive cry of the New Orleans blacks” (201)—a notion of “the black man’s soul” underpins Goffin’s message: “What magic powers did the music possess which slept in the souls of the blacks and raised them from their helpless state, yes, even as high as the esteem of the white man” (159)? In passages like this, black Americans are celebrated as a lowly but spellbinding people whose allegedly uninhibited and primeval spirituality can be embraced as a cure against feelings of modern alienation and fragmentation.[18](#) Questions of musical technique and training are notably absent here: “The search for the primitive goes hand in hand with the search for the pastoral,” as Berndt Ostendorf notes in a different context (588).

12But how exactly do these primitivist premises “color” Goffin’s narrative? A first example is the depiction of Armstrong in performance. In Armstrong’s “Notebooks,” musical performances are seldom the object of narration. Armstrong’s account of his success at Chicago’s Vendome Theater with the

Erskine Tate Symphony Orchestra in 1925, for instance, only includes phrases such as “the ‘opening night was sensational” and “I became quite a ‘Figure at the ‘Vendome.’ Especially with the Gals” (95). Goffin’s substantially longer version gets much mileage out of imagining the performance:

Eyes closed, he felt himself borne to heaven on the wings of inspiration, and came down to earth only when a thunder of applause brought him back to reality. [...] Then time stood still once more. Louis shed all restraint and played. He was a pure musical spirit freed of all earthly ties. (*Horn* 217)

13This version sharply contrasts Armstrong’s own account, which insists on the very earthly ties—the context of the performance; the “Gals” in the audience—that Goffin denies. In an earlier chapter, Goffin writes about Armstrong’s performance at the Lincoln Gardens with the Joe Oliver Band:

In a flash the young musician was blowing out his soul through the mouth of his trumpet. He blew so hard that the skin of his nape was stretched hard; he had closed his eyes, and seemed in a trance, out of the living world, completely possessed by unalloyed musical exaltation. (167)

14This passage contains all the hallmarks of celebratory jazz fiction: the sexual dimension of staged musical blackness (the “nape [...] stretched hard”), the romantic understanding of creative expression as unmediated expression, and the trance-like effect that the music has on the listener and that is projected back onto the performing musician. Yet it is very much unlike Armstrong’s later version in *Satchmo: My Life in New Orleans*, where the musician cites his familiarity with Joe Oliver on and off the bandstand as the reason for their musical understanding and excellence (cf. 239).

15Note also Goffin’s curious comments about Armstrong’s singing:

He wrenched out the word *baby* as if torn from the depths of his being. A shiver ran through his listeners. Everybody had stopped dancing. Louis finished the stanza and broke out at once into a toothy grin, wrapped his lips around the trumpet, shut his eyes, and climbed up an up.

16As a biographer who claims to be privy to Armstrong’s inner life (“the depth of his being”) as well as to the perspective of the audience, Goffin continues:

The spectators were frozen into silence at the sight of this giant with the bulging neck, his nose flattened by the force of vibrancy, his left hand clutching a spotless handkerchief, who could stir up a whirlwind of strange music. (*Horn* 251)

17It is remarkable that the musician's image on stage appears larger than life (Armstrong was actually of relatively small height and definitely not a giant), that the music is heard as racially Other ("strange"), and that racial features are exaggerated in the process: "toothy grin," "bulging neck," "nose flattened." In the Goffin text, we thus find a shuttling back and forth between Armstrong's supposed emotions ("he felt himself borne to heaven on the wings of inspiration") and the Belgian writer's rapturous gaze across the Atlantic at the mysterious black genius beyond rational explanation ("trance," "unalloyed musical exaltation," "pure musical spirit freed of all earthly ties").

18A second example is Goffin's presentation of New Orleans dance hall entertainment. For the purpose of my argument, it makes sense to reverse the chronology of the exchange between Armstrong and Goffin by introducing Armstrong's version—told nearly twenty years after *Horn of Plenty*—before I deal with Goffin's earlier portrait. In his interview with *Life* magazine (April 1966; revised for book publication in 1971), Armstrong recalls the dances at Funky Butt Hall, a place which Goffin had called "the birthplace of jazz" in *Horn of Plenty* (38) and which Armstrong had not mentioned in the "Notebooks":

When I was about 4 or 5, still wearing dresses, I lived with my mother in Jane's Alley in a place called Brick Row—a lot of cement, rented rooms sort of like a motel. And right in the middle of that on Perdido Street was the Funky Butt Hall—old, beat up, big cracks in the wall. On Saturday nights, Mama couldn't find us 'cause we wanted to hear that music. Before the dance the band would play out front about a half hour. And us little kids would all do little dances. [...]

Then we'd go look through the big cracks in the wall of the Funky Butt. It wasn't no classfied place, just a big old room with a bandstand. And to a tune like *The Bucket's Got a Hole in It*, some of them chicks would get way down, shake everything, slapping themselves on the cheek of their behind. Yeah! At the end of the night, they'd do the quadrille, beautiful to see, where everybody lined up, crossed over—if no fights hadn't started before that. Cats'd have to take their razors in with them, because they might have to scratch somebody before they left there. If any of them cats want to show respect for their chick—which they seldom did—they'd crook their left elbow out when they danced and lay their hat on it—a John B. Stetson they'd probably saved for six months to buy. When the dance was over, fellow would walk up and say, "Did you touch my hat, partner?" and if the cat say "yes"—Wop!—he hit him right in the chops. (Meryman 7-8)

19The setting, mood, word choice, and narrative pacing illustrate Armstrong's command of oral storytelling. Note the tight structure of the anecdote (as well as the literal *punch* line), the use of black dialect (double negatives as in "wasn't no" or "if no fights hadn't started"), slang ("chicks," "cats," "get way down," "chops"),

exclamations (“Yeah!” and “Wop!”), and direct speech. The peeping of the children and the illicit sexuality of the dancing add to the overall erotic appeal of the tale, as does the sexual innuendo, which unfolds through a series of puns: the “big *cracks* in the wall” and the “Hole” in the bucket resonate with the “cheeks” of the women’s “behinds” as well as the title phrase “funky butt.” The slang expression “scratch” for cutting somebody with a razor belongs to the same word field (in the sense of “scratching one’s behind”).

20According to Armstrong, jazz is music of the lower classes: “wasn’t no classified place”; “a John B. Stetson they’d probably saved for six months to buy.” It is played in an environment of unabashed sexuality (“chicks would get way down, shake everything”) and male violence (“Cats’d have to take their razors in with them”); it is integrated into the communal structures of black New Orleans both geographically—Armstrong lives right next to Funky Butt Hall—and socially—kids and grown-ups go out to dance to it on Saturday nights. It is also a musico-cultural hybrid: the quadrille that ends the dancing had been imported to New Orleans by French settlers, but it is played in a “ragged” style at Funky Butt Hall and is accompanied by a dance Armstrong calls “funkybuttin” (qtd. in Bergreen 105).

21Compare this to Goffin’s startlingly discrepant depiction of what is ultimately the same scene:

A crowd pushed and jostled at the bar, with many a drunken and half-naked wench emptying her whisky glass at one gulp between puffs of smoke from a fat cigar. Louis hesitated; dare he go in? The jerky rhythm beat like his own pulse. A hulking Negro with shiny black face, white eyeballs, and glistening teeth, was hugging a “high yaller” who pretended to swoon as she crushed a camelia [sic] to distended nostrils. (*Horn* 22)

22The references to the “half-naked wench,” “hulking Negro,” “shiny black face,” “white eyeballs,” “glistening teeth” mobilize images of black primitives and blackface minstrels. In fact, *Horn of Plenty* is filled with minstrel images. We encounter a young Armstrong “stuffing cakes between his thick lips” (28) and feasting on watermelon (32); the neighborhood is populated by “darkies” (47), “half-naked wenche[s]” (22), and pickaninnies [...] rolling their eyeballs” (12).

23In Goffin’s depiction of Funky Butt Hall, Armstrong’s evocation of “funkiness” and the erotic movement of body parts (the *Funky Butt*), which connects body odor with musical and physical exertion (raunchy sweat as a sexually enticing odor), is interpreted as depravity and lewdness:

To this day the denizens of Perdido have not forgotten that ill-smelling establishment. Its very name betrays a wanton etymology, graphically characterizing the awful smell that always pervaded the air after the

dances were over. They were totally unrestrained in their lewdness, and the black dancers' sweaty bodies heightened the general atmosphere of depravity. (17)

24Goffin's primitivist gaze motivates a moment of literal nose-thumping: expressions such as "ill-smelling," "awful smell," and "atmosphere of depravity" insinuate a racial difference that is coded in olfactory terms, and they distinguish between a culturally superior self interested in the sonic productions of the primitive Other (the musical sounds emitted from black bodies) and the physical strangeness of that Other (black body odor). A later account of the same dances related in a portrait piece on Armstrong in *Ebony* magazine, however, illustrates the potentially positive connotations of body odor:

[Armstrong] peeked through the windows of the Funky Butt Dance Hall [...] and saw two or three hundred sweaty bodies grinding together as a shirt-sleeved trumpeter named Buddy Bolden urged them on, shouting: "All right now, all the good gals is home to bed. Ain't none left but the stinkers. That's good, 'cause they living up to the name of this dance hall. Hey, any of y'all left your behinds at home? Hope not, 'cause you gonna have to shake 'em plenty to keep time with this stuff we 'bout to play." (Sanders 142)

25While it is enough for Armstrong and the writer for *Ebony* to evoke this scene and let Buddy Bolden's sexual commentary stand on its own—including the reversal of conventional notions of propriety inherent in the idea that being bad and stinky is a good thing—Goffin imagines Armstrong's own feelings in order to promote the primitivist gaze:

His heart beat faster as a wave of nostalgia swept over him, stirred by the same remote call which had come from the depth of the African bush to quicken the pulse of his ancestors on some dim past. He could hear the thud of the tom-toms pulsating in the night. Louis Armstrong had never known Africa, but Africa was throbbing in his heart. (*Horn* 22)

26In *Horn of Plenty*, "Africa" thus functions as the sonic signifier ("tom-toms") of racial essence: Armstrong has no direct knowledge of African music, but he allegedly knows the music because it is in his blood ("pulsating," cited above; "writing in sweat and blood"; "beat like his own pulse").

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27Armstrong himself only began to trace his ancestry and music back to Africa in the late 1950s and early 1960s.¹⁹ In a 1962 interview with Studs Terkel, he explained that African American musicians had "copied" the "[t]om-toms and drumbeats" from the Africans, "who brought the music with them [...] when the

slaves came.” One should note here that Armstrong is actually reversing Terkel’s assumption that jazz had influenced African music (“The highlife music of Ghana [...] stem[med] from the jazz of America?”). In other words, he rejects the idea that jazz in the 1950s and 60s is an expression of a distinctly American cultural excellence and presents his tours through Africa as a journey back to his roots (“It brought me back to generations, my ancestors in Africa, in New Orleans ...” [qtd. in Terkel 145]). Thus, most important in Armstrong’s continued negotiation of the meanings with which his life story could be invested is the public recognition of these African roots: “I came from here, way back. At least my people did. Now I know this is my country too. After all, my ancestors came from here and I still have African blood in me,” he explained to reporters in 1956 during his first African tour (qtd. in Von Eschen 61). When he returned to the African continent in 1960, his allegiance with its peoples and places was even more pronounced:

I feel at home in Africa—more so now that I’ve been all through the place. I’m African-descended down to the bone, and I dig the friendly ways these people go about things. I lived the same way in New Orleans and they get my message here. I got quite a bit of African blood in me from my grandmammy on my mammy’s side and from my grandpappy on my pappy’s side. (qtd. in Millstein 24)

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28Not only does he feel at home in Africa, a place that differs decidedly from Goffin’s primitivist “Congo,” and not only does he embrace Africa as an ancestral birthplace, but he also uses the media attention his trip had garnered to make a complex, and ultimately ambiguous, statement about race relations in the U.S. He claims an exclusively African racial heritage (“I’m African-descended down to the bone”) on the one hand, but at the same time, he also seems to acknowledge a history of racial mixing: “I got *quite a bit of African blood* in me from my grandmammy on my mammy’s side and from my grandpappy on my pappy’s side.” This sentence may imply, however slightly, that there could have been interracial sexual contact among his ancestors (since he is not a full-blooded African), but it also insinuates that this contact may have occurred on unequal terms, perhaps in the common form of white slaveholders raping their female slaves. This inequality, one can possibly conclude, is expressed in the very wording of the statement, the terms “grandmammy” and “grandpappy” hinting ever so slightly at the unequal distribution of power encoded in the sounds and images of blackface minstrelsy.[20](#)

29Armstrong’s efforts to “write back”—to supplant Goffin’s notions of Africa and “blackness” with a series of more complex and more self-determined images—can be interpreted as significant attempts to do more than renegotiate the primitivism of the biographical narrative promoted in *Horn of Plenty*. They also engage with the substantial sway of visual images, sonic signifiers and verbal depictions of black culture that nineteenth-century blackface minstrelsy had

bestowed on American popular culture, including ragtime and jazz, and that had resurfaced in Goffin's presentation of Armstrong as both primitivist noble savage and minstrel musician. And indeed, Goffin frequently evokes the singing and dancing Sambo figure readers would have known from blackface minstrelsy, coon songs and other racially deprecating representations of African American culture. Take a scene from Armstrong's youth through which Goffin seeks to connect the musician's performances (here: dancing) with minstrelsy by revisiting "Ethiopian Delineator," Thomas D. Rice's story of the origins of "Jump Jim Crow" (1829). According to Rice's own account, he had met an "old Negro" in 1828

whose right shoulder [was] deformed and drawn up high, his leg gnarled with rheumatism, stiff and crooked at the knee, doing an odd-looking dance while singing: "Weel about and turn about and do jus so; / Ebery time I weel about, I jump Jim Crow." (qtd. in Toll 28)

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30Rice claimed that he memorized the words and song and even bought the dancer's clothes as stage attire. The changes Rice made, adding verses as well as "quicken[ing] and slightly chang[ing] the air [i.e., tune]," allegedly preserved the original flavor of the performance while turning it into a presentable form for the stage (28). The application of blackface is excised from the account, and it is telling that the origins of American popular culture are constructed as black, disabled and anonymous, yet powerfully productive.²¹ What we have here is essentially an exercise in racial ventriloquism and imaginary racechange: white (and predominantly Northern or Midwestern) minstrels speaking "black" through the guise of imaginary black slaves or ex-slaves and, as I have shown, the white Belgian Goffin narrating Armstrong's life story and speaking "black" (as well as speaking "jazz") by inventing the musician's speech and thoughts.²²

31Compare Rice's story with Goffin's depiction of Armstrong as a young dancer: "Louis knew only one kind of dance. He would buckwing his way into the center of the group of kids, and imitate a hunchback or a lame man, then straighten up abruptly and dance a lively jig" (*Horn* 44). In the surviving portion of Armstrong's "Notebooks," no such passage can be found, but banjo player and Armstrong contemporary (and later accompanist with the Hot Five and Seven in the 1920s) Johnny St. Cyr remembers a similar event. Setting the performance at Pete Lala's Cabaret in New Orleans, St. Cyr explains:

[O]ld man Lala had a limp and he would come across the floor, limping and shaking his finger at Louis [...]. After he had turned his back, Louis would go into a little dance which would end up with him taking a few steps with a limp and shaking his finger just like the old man. This of course would bring the house down. Louis was always a comedian [...]. (qtd. in Pinfold 26)

32Like Thomas D. Rice's Jim Crow, Lala is an old man, and he is limping. More remarkable about this performance, however, is that St. Cyr situates the dance within an African American context (the originator and the appropriator are black men; the performance takes place in a black New Orleans honky tonk) and wrestles the power of the performance away from blackface minstrelsy (without, however, erasing its echoes): Armstrong, the soon-to-be jazz king, uses Lala's funny walk, not a version of Rice's Jim Crow, as the raw material for his act. The warbled history of cultural borrowings makes for the complexity of such assessments. It is ultimately impossible to know exactly in what ways the Jim Crow influences had traveled: whether Rice had copied a black folk dance that survived until the 1910s, when Armstrong used it to ridicule Lala; whether Armstrong was familiar with Jim Crow-based minstrel dances (or visual illustrations of them); or whether Goffin and St. Cyr simply channeled their recollections through the familiar minstrel lens.

33Notably, Armstrong's own recollections of his comedic dancing and funny skits revise Goffin version of the story. Here, the sight of self-confident black dancers moving their bodies to the rhythms of a jazz tune is connected with minstrel comedy at first. Armstrong describes a contest at the Sunset Café in Chicago, which climaxed in an ultra-fast version of the Charleston, a dance popular in the mid-1920s. The retrospective telling emphasizes the comic physique of Armstrong and three of his band members:

There was Earl Hines, as tall as he is; Tubby Hall, as fat as he was; little Joe Walker, as short as he is; and myself, as fat as I was at the time. We would stretch out across that [dance] floor doing the Charleston as fast as the music would play it. Boy, oh boy, you talking about four cats picking them up and laying them down—that was us. (qtd. in Shapiro and Hentoff 105)

34He recalls elsewhere:

All the white people, all the nightlifers, the rich people from Sheridan Road and the big hotels would come out there on the South Side. [...] I'd sing songs through a megaphone and four of us [in the band] would close the show doing the Charleston. (Meryman 36)

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35In Armstrong's version of the story, Goffin's "lively jig" is complicated: The dancing must have been rather acrobatic ("four cats picking them up and lying them down"), especially when we consider the speed of the musical accompaniment ("as fast as the music would play it"). What is more, such performances were meant to entertain white audiences ("[a]ll the white people), and not just any white people, but "the rich people from Sheridan Road and the big hotels." Armstrong thus displays a self-conscious awareness of the particular

contexts and purposes of his performances: they are designed to be sold to an audience of white slummers (who “would come out there on the South Side”) and, even if they fall back on minstrel conventions, they also provide Armstrong and his fellow musicians with economic opportunities and a successful career in show business.²³

36 Armstrong further mentions a specialty number he did with drummer Zutty Singleton in drag at the Metropolitan Theatre. Even though he gives no indication of stage setting and club décor, the elements of the show alone would have evoked plenty of minstrel connotations: the number with Zutty evokes the “wench” routines of the minstrel shows and vaudeville, the comic dancing recalls Jim Crow’s jerky jumping, and the comedy invests the music with a minstrel aura of “mirth and hilarity” (*Variety* magazine; qtd. in Lemke 84) that was typical of black entertainment in Harlem:

Zutty [...] would dress up as one of those real loud and rough gals, with a short skirt, and a pillow in back of him. I was dressed in old rags, the beak of my cap turned around like a tough guy, and he, or she (Zutty) was my gal. As he would come down the aisle, interrupting my song, the people would just scream with laughter. (qtd. in Shapiro and Hentoff 106)

37 While Armstrong describes the minstrel comedy but ends his account with a reference to his and Zutty’s effective handling of their audience (“people would just scream with laughter”), Goffin’s depiction of an earlier dance act by Armstrong’s vocal quartet in New Orleans essentially casts the dancing Armstrong as a minstrel figure:

[T]he quartet’s big hit was a side-splitting scene in which Louis Armstrong made passionate love to Redhead Happy. While the three others were blowing a discreet accompaniment Louis declared his love in passionate terms and rolled his eyes in a simulation of desire. [...] Louis would break forth in his low voice, his lips drawn back to show the pearliest set of teeth in Dixie, and sing his biggest hit: ‘*Everybody’s [sic] gal is my gal, and your gal is my gal too!*’ (*Horn* 45)

38 Whether Goffin invented this scene or not is unclear, but the American translation is very explicit about his minstrel assumptions: “rolled his eyes”, “pearliest set of teeth in Dixie.” In this and other instances, the minstrel discourse in *Horn of Plenty* was amplified by the translator, James Bezou, who occasionally added minstrel references where there are none: “noirs” (54) is translated as “darkies,” for instance (47), and “les vieilles mégères” (132) as “mammies” (124), while “toute bouche ouverte avec les dents les plus blanches et les plus régulières” (53) appears as “lips drawn back to show the pearliest set of teeth in Dixie” in the quotation above. The transatlantic negotiation of racial discourses is thus inscribed within the very processes of language translation that brought Goffin’s

biography to an American readership.

39In order to pinpoint final differences between Armstrong's and Goffin's respective representations of events, we may turn to Armstrong's various accounts of a train trip to St. Louis. In his second major autobiography, *Satchmo: My Life in New Orleans*, Armstrong provides a glimpse at two "southern colored boys" taking the train up North. When the conductor tells people to change trains, Armstrong acts in a slow-witted and clumsy manner:

[M]y ears pricked up like a jackass. When I grabbed all my things I was so excited that I loosened the top of my olive bottle [...]. In the rush to get seats somebody bumped into me and knocked the olives out of my arm. The jar broke into a hundred pieces and the olives rolled all over the platform. [...] I felt pretty bad about those good olives, but when I finally got on the train I was still holding my fish sandwich. Yes sir, I at least managed to keep that. (190-91)

40Ten years prior to this account, Armstrong had already described the same train trip in his "Goffin Notebooks." The basic story line is identical while the way it is told and some of the specific people and places involved are different. "We left New Orleans 'by 'Train and by me not traveling to any place before, I did not know what to do as far as Lunch was concerned," Armstrong writes and continues:

So I went to "PRATS 'RESTAURANT and Bought myself a Big "Fish Loaf —I think it was trout. I also Bought myself a Big Bottle of "Olives' I had it and the Fish Wrapped up in a Paper Sack. We had to change trains at a little town called GAILSBURG ILL. The Station was Crowded with people Changing Trains for All Directions. Our Train Arrived and by me rushing along to catch the train with David Jones (mellophone player) —I Dropped the "Fish Sandwich on the ground the '*Olives Dropped*' also and the Olives Bottle Broke and "Olives were running all over the place. The Fish Sandwich Bag Busted and the Fish fell all over the ground. "Oh Boy" was I Embarrassed—I thought sure, David Jones would help me pick up those things—But "*SHUCKS* He only walked away Embarrassed also. (83-84)

41*Horn of Plenty*, however, rewrites Armstrong's version by changing the tone (from humor to an emphasis on fear), by altering the cause of the accident (from the overcrowded platform to Armstrong's clumsiness), and by introducing a moment of minstrel hokum that smacks of racial deprecation (the *white* trainman cursing the *black* klutz):

Before leaving the city he went to Segretta's grocery, bought a fish sandwich and a bottle of olives, and took them away in a brown paper bag. Then—alas!—at the place where they had to change trains, as Louis was asking a white trainman which track they should go to, he

dropped the brown bag and the bottle broke, splattering the trainman's uniformed leg with vinegar and olives. The man cursed him roundly, and Louis cast an imploring glance at David Jones. But David was suddenly engrossed in the scenery, ignoring Louis's predicament. So Louis, afraid to make a false move, boarded the train for St. Louis both crestfallen and hungry. (*Horn* 139)

42Goffin further omits Armstrong's positive attitude toward this experience as a moment of bonding—"David Jones and I *laugh* about that situation every time we run into each other" (Armstrong, "Goffin Notebooks" 84)—thereby changing the autobiographer's self-conscious reflection on his role in the music industry to an unconscious pandering to the minstrel gaze.

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43On a more general level, Armstrong's "Notebooks" and Goffin's *Horn of Plenty* participate in a larger debate over the meanings and significances of jazz, a debate which was shaped by a transatlantic competition for interpretive hegemony between writers such as Goffin and the French Hugues Panassié and American jazz critics of the 1920s, 30s, and 40s such as J.A. Rogers (especially his "Jazz at Home" essay in Alain Locke's *New Negro* anthology²⁴), Frederick Ramsey, Jr. and Charles Edward Smith (mainly their book *Jazzmen* of 1939) and Rudi Blesh (*Shining Trumpets*). This competition took place within the parameters of what may be called "popular primitivism." To clarify my position, it will be helpful to connect my understanding of this type of primitivism with Sieglinde Lemke's conceptualization of primitivist modernism.²⁵ Lemke understands primitivist modernism as "an overdetermined discourse" (75) that takes place across a variety of media, and she identifies a "gamut of primitivist tropes—vitality, gaiety, rhythm, movement, color, and laughter" (84)—all of which indeed saturate *Horn of Plenty*. "This is a relic of nineteenth-century romanticism," she adds, "suggesting that white people admire a person or people of color (albeit in a remote way) because they feel that blacks are uninhibited, dynamic, and free." Thus, "[w]hen the term is used in that sense, people of color [...] are implicitly opposed to the modern world's self-control, discipline, and shame" (25). Lemke finally suggests that the American reception of jazz was structured by an exotic gaze at the black musician that was fundamentally different from European forms of primitivism (cf. 67). In that sense, rebelling against Victorian values by embracing black music did not necessarily imply a primitivist motivation; many of those who went to Harlem to listen to jazz "were merely slumming in the exotic" (67).²⁶ Lemke therefore argues that the American discourse did not so much revive European primitivism than "reinscribe [...] blacks into the old Sambo image updated to the context of a modern leisure society" (85).

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44 While I generally agree with Lemke's argument and am substantially indebted to it, especially in terms of its transatlantic scope, my understanding of "popular primitivism" differs from her conceptions in the sense that it is more flexible towards the syncretic dynamics of popular culture. In my view, the largely European notion of the jazzman as a noble savage and the largely American perception of musicians like Armstrong as modern minstrel figures frequently converged in culturally productive ways, of which the potent mixture of primitive exoticism and minstrel comedy that emerges from Goffin's *Horn of Plenty* and Armstrong's manuscript/responses is an instructive example. Moreover, I believe that we should focus more extensively on the discursive output of the black jazz musician: Armstrong's repeated efforts to bring different versions of his life story to potentially global, but at least transatlantic, audiences as well as his ability to aid in the inscription of several such versions—from the modernist jazz soloist to the roving Ambassador Satch, but also from Samboesque entertainer to an Uncle Tom figure—into the popular record of American culture long beyond his death in 1971. In that regard, the life narratives of black American jazz musicians like Armstrong can be fruitfully discussed as elements of a larger struggle for expressive agency and creative freedom that was always intricately conjoined with an interest in furthering the singer's and trumpet player's star power and musical fame.²⁷ Indeed, Armstrong's writings may be sensibly understood as discursive interventions in the struggle for autobiographical self-determination, but it is also striking that they are presented and disseminated in such a way that they ultimately lead to more stories (from *Horn of Plenty* to the latest biographies by Teachout and Riccardi as well as my own forthcoming monograph) rather than endorse one definitive version.²⁸

45 When Armstrong began his career, "the status of jazz in early twentieth-century culture was not as a modernist art *itself*, but as primitivist fodder—as Dionysian instinct, passion, emotions, subconscious impulse—for the 'true' modernists," John Gennari observes. While Pablo Picasso's sculptures were touted as the works of a modernist artist who had found a way of revitalizing Western art through primitive Africanisms, Armstrong was "celebrated [...] for *being* a 'primitive,' a creature of instinct, who was struggling nobly to incorporate European rationalism" ("Jazz Criticism" 465). Obviously, such celebrations are relatively rare today. In fact, more often than not, we now encounter exceptionalist readings of Armstrong as the genius who happened to be black but was gifted with an innate musical geniality and a quintessentially American will to overcome all cultural barriers and fulfill one's destiny. Yet if we aim for a more comprehensive, more complex, and also more critical perspective on Armstrong's role in American culture, we are well advised to recall Goffin's and Armstrong's transatlantic negotiation of popular primitive modernisms, which teaches us that our perception of music is always determined to a substantial degree by the discourses that both surround it and bring it into language.

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Notes

¹ This essay is based in parts on different segments from my monograph *Music Is My Life: Louis Armstrong, Autobiography, and American Jazz*, forthcoming from the University of Michigan Press in 2012. Many issues that are only touched upon here—Armstrong's writing style and autobiographical voice; intermedial interfaces among textual, visual, and musical modes of performance; the cultural poetics of blackface minstrelsy—are discussed in greater depth there. I wish to thank Barbara Buchenau and Richard Ellis for organizing the panel "Primitive Modernisms and Diasporic Identity" at the European Association for American

Studies conference in Oslo (2008), where an earlier version of this paper was delivered. I also want to thank and Simon Stein for his help with Goffin's French writings and Reinhold Wagnleitner for his encouragement and support. Finally, I am deeply indebted to the many comments provided by the members of my doctoral committee: Frank Kelleter, Heinrich Detering, and Winfried Herget.

[2](#) The manuscript is held by the Institute of Jazz Studies at Rutgers University. Armstrong regularly supplied written material for prospective biographers; for instance, he wrote several lengthy letters to the British Max Jones, who reprinted some of them in *Louis: The Louis Armstrong Story 1900-1971*.

[3](#) I will focus on the English version, *Horn of Plenty*, rather than the French version, *Le Roi du Jazz*, mainly because the English text is the one to which Armstrong responded and also the one that left its mark on the American jazz discourse.

[4](#) For Lemke, any assessment of American modernism must be aware of its "chiaroscuro" effect, its essentially hybrid nature as a transatlantic but also interracial phenomenon (Lemke 4). While I subscribe to Lemke's general approach, I believe that her focus on Paul Whiteman's autobiography *Jazz* (with Margaret McBride, 1926) marginalizes the perspective of African American musicians like Armstrong and others. On jazz and (primitivist) modernism, see Appel; Gioia; Radano; cf. also Reinhold Wagnleitner's characterization of jazz "as musical equivalent of the culture of modernity" and an "essential sound of modernity" (20).

[5](#) In that sense, my perspective both draws on, and differs from, William Kenney's approach in his essay "Negotiating the Color Line: Louis Armstrong's Autobiographies." I retain the notion of Armstrong's autobiographical narratives as the result of negotiations (with co-writers, publishers, audiences) but move from a national to an international (i.e., transatlantic) view (cf. 38, 39).

[6](#) Blesh's romantic enthrallment with what is perceived as an innocent culture comes across forcefully in a passage that celebrates the mythological appeal of the music: "primitivism does not mean crude and unformed or ill-formed, tentative or barbarous. It means instead a point of view, a way of looking at the world innocently, directly, and imaginatively. Like the primitivism of children, it sees without veils and records in its own peculiar, powerful, magical symbols" (13). While largely conserving the primitivist gaze ("innocently, directly, and imaginatively"; "children"; "peculiar"), this passage also seeks to reorient the debate toward a more liberating and race-conscious view that recognizes the cultural capital ("magical symbols") provided by jazz and, in that sense, is clearly indebted to W.E.B. Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903). In fact, the wording of Blesh's remarks strongly recalls Du Bois's notion of double-consciousness. The most insightful constructions of the jazz debates of the 1940s (and other periods) are DeVaux; Gendron; Gennari, "Jazz Criticism" and *Blowin' Hot and Cool*;

Raeburn.

[7](#) On jazz during the Nazi era, see Kater; Zwerin.

[8](#) I cannot go into detail here about Goffin's political convictions and understanding of Belgian colonial rule. This subject deserves its own extended study. For historical context, see the section "Belgium and Its Colonies" in Poddar, Patke, and Jensen (6-56).

[9](#) Goffin is most likely referring to the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments to the United States Constitution, which abolished slavery, established citizenship rights, and prohibited the denial of voting rights based on race.

[10](#) Gennari speaks of a "primitivist fallacy that discolored the French critics' perception of jazz" and that viewed "Negroes [as] blessed with trance powers, natural rhythm, and superior instinct" ("Jazz Criticism" 469).

[11](#) Panassié's and Goffin's writings were among the first who sought to develop a cultural history and an aesthetic theory of American jazz. Both Panassié's *Le Jazz Hot* (1934; trans. *Hot Jazz*, 1936) and *The Real Jazz* and Goffin's *Aux Frontiers de Jazz* (1932) announce their view of Armstrong as the quintessential jazz musician early on: *Aux Frontiers de Jazz* is dedicated to Armstrong as the "real King of Jazz," while *Le Jazz Hot/Hot Jazz* are prefaced by a brief letter from Louis Armstrong and *The Real Jazz* carries an Armstrong quotation as its epigraph. Goffin also contributed the essay "Hot Jazz," which anticipated many of his later positions, to Nancy Cunard's *Negro* anthology (1934).

[12](#) My focus on Armstrong should not be taken to mean that popular representations of primitivism and minstrelsy were confined to a single musician; indeed, while Armstrong is a particularly interesting case study, dealing with these discourses and representations was integral to the lives and careers of virtually all black jazz musicians. Duke Ellington, for instance, fashioned himself as a "primitive pedestrian minstrel" in his memoir *Music Is My Mistress* (441), performed his music as part of primitivist (or at least exotic) floorshows in places like the New York Cotton Club, and recorded compositions with titles like "Jungle Nights in Harlem" (1930).

[13](#) For a rebuttal of the European beginnings of jazz criticism, see Collier.

[14](#) On Armstrong's spontaneous and provisional writing aesthetics, see the introduction in Brothers; Edwards, "Louis Armstrong"; Kenney; Stein, "Performance" and "Jazz Autobiography"; Veneciano.

[15](#) His account of Armstrong's hometown New Orleans connects musicians and events ahistorcially, such as when he writes that Armstrong knew and regularly heard Buddy Bolden (22-24, 29, 40) perform. He also uses Armstrong's trademark name "Satchmo" anachronistically; the musician was given the name in the early

1930s. The early years of Armstrong's life, not covered in the "Notebooks," had already been described in *Swing That Music*, which provided an additional source. Goffin's knowledge of *Swing That Music* is indicated by an explicit reference to the text (140) and by several sentences that are clearly inspired by the autobiography (cf. 157, 174, 302).

[16](#) Cf. Teachout 300.

[17](#) Kenney proposes a similar argument about *Swing That Music* when he suggests that the reliance on white authenticators and ghostwriters (crooner Rudy Vallee's introduction; Horace Gerlach's musical appended musical explanations; many passages that were obviously ghosted) recalls Armstrong's reliance on white managers and promoters in the music business. For selected engagements with the socio-cultural and economic contexts as well reception and discursive construction of early jazz, see Evans; Ogren; O'Meally.

[18](#) Due to restrictions of space, I cannot connect Armstrong's and Goffin's exchange with the complex role of primitivist ideologies and representational forms in Harlem Renaissance cultural production and intellectual thought (Carl Van Vechten, Alain Locke, Langston Hughes, Zora Neal Hurston, and others). Alain Locke's distinction, in *The Negro and His Music* (1936), between the "healthy and earthy expression in the original peasant paganism" of the black folk and "its hectic, artificial and sometimes morally vicious counterpart which was the outcome of the vogue of artificial and commercialized jazz entertainment" is not too far removed from Goffin's perspective, which again illustrates the genuinely transatlantic nature of the jazz debate. Locke argues that "the vogue of jazz" in the 1910s and 20s was "first a reaction from Puritan repressions and then an escape from the tensions and monotonies of a machine-ridden, extroverted form of civilization [...]. Its devotees, especially at the height of the craze, rationalized this in a complete creed and cult of primitivism" (qtd. in Walser 78-79). In many ways, Locke simultaneously dissects and reinforces essential primitivist positions. For analyses of these issues, see Anderson; Chinitz. On the transnational interchanges between New York and Francophone intellectuals during the 1920s and 30s, see Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora*.

[19](#) Armstrong toured Africa twice, in 1956 (sponsored by Edward R. Murrow) and in 1960-61 (sponsored by the State Department). On the state department tours, Armstrong's relation with African politics, and his role as Ambassador Satch, see Davenport; Von Eschen.

[20](#) Armstrong had declared Ghana as "my country, too" in late 1956, thus claiming double citizenship metaphorically. In 1957, he judged the civil rights violations in the South as being "so bad a colored man hasn't got any country" ("Louis Armstrong, Barring" 23). On the complex entanglements of American civil rights rhetoric and notions of Africa, see Monson; for a concise summary of Armstrong's public protest against acts of racial discrimination such as the barring of the Little

Rock Nine from attending an Arkansas high school, see Meckna; these events are covered in greater detail in the two recent insightful biographies by Terry Teachout and Ricky Riccardi.

[21](#) This exemplifies Eric Lott’s “love and theft” dynamic (see Lott, *Love and Theft*) as well as Berndt Ostendorf’s pronouncement of a double process of “[a]ppreciation and caricature” (579). Most historians agree that Rice’s recollection may have been fabricated to promote his act.

[22](#) On racial ventriloquism and racechange, see Gubar.

[23](#) For more extensive analysis of Armstrong’s connection with jazz dancing, see Harker.

[24](#) It is telling that one of the key terms of the *New Negro* anthology is “primitive” (cf. Lemke 119-33).

[25](#) Lemke distinguishes among “chronological primitivism,” which asserts the superiority of pre-modern people; “cultural primitivism,” which associates non-Western peoples with romanticized notions of instinct, naturalness, and sexuality; “spiritual primitivism,” which allots power to an inexplicable and irrational form of mysticism; and “aesthetic primitivism,” which describes the process of assimilating non-European art forms into Western art (26).

[26](#) The concept of primitivism, Lemke maintains, “is often used synonymously with exoticism, implying an admiration of the noble primitive” (25; cf. J.A. Rogers’s reference to jazz in Alain Locke’s *New Negro* anthology as a “[t]ransplanted exotic”; 216).

[27](#) Lemke devotes a chapter to Josephine Baker’s negotiation of black physicality, her *danse sauvage*, on the Paris stage in *La Revue Nègre* (1925). My analysis of Armstrong follows many of her objectives in this chapter.

[28](#) I take the notion of the jazz musician’s “discursive intervention” from Eric Porter’s analysis of Charles Mingus (139).

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