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Performing “Stormy Weather”:
Ethel Waters, Lena Horne, and Katherine Dunham

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In the eleventh scene of The Cotton Club Parade of 1933, motionless before a log cabin backdrop, leaning against a lamppost, veiled in a dark blue spotlight, backed by Duke Ellington and his orchestra, Ethel Waters performed the song “Stormy Weather.” With this historic performance, which garnered no less than twelve encores on opening night, Waters introduced into black musical history a song that refigures some of our assumptions about the uses of popular music, the history of American standardization, and the staging of African-American modernism. In this essay, I pursue some specific iterations and inscriptions of “Stormy Weather” through key performances of it in the first half of the twentieth century: its first live performance by Waters and Ellington in The Cotton Club Parade of 1933 and its cinematic performance by Lena Horne and dancer Katherine Dunham in the movie musical Stormy Weather (1943).

As this discussion will suggest, “Stormy Weather” shows how an African-American modernist impulse and racial critique could be posed, voiced, and circulated through the sounds, movements, and mises-en-scène of popular performance. Looking to these dramaturgical dimensions of “Stormy Weather” will reveal expressions of African-American modernism in some unlikely places: Tin Pan Alley standards, Cotton Club Parades, and Hollywood all-black movie musicals.

“Stormy Weather” might seem to be an odd place to turn to consider the circulation and staging of African-American modernism. The popular standard, written by Jewish songwriting team Harold Arlen and Ted Koehler, was a product of American cabaret culture and the publishing industry known as Tin Pan Alley, the system of musical production, marketing, and distribution that worked to sonically exploit, discipline, and standardize the cultural heterogeneity produced by urbanization and modernization in the first three decades of the twentieth century. The phrase “Tin Pan Alley” was coined around 1903 to name the loose collection of sheet-music publishing houses that employed composers and lyricists to write American popular songs. The growth and reach of Tin Pan Alley was part of the process of cultural homogenization that Alan Trachtenberg calls the “incorporation of America”: Tin Pan Alley songs
were mass-produced and mass-circulated; they offered musical standard-
ization in lieu of aesthetic experimentation, allowing for only closely
circumscribed innovation within its formal and thematic formulas; and
they took full advantage of modernizing technologies to facilitate mass
production. These songs were composed for and marketed through vari-
ous modes of popular performance and new technologies of distribution,
from song pluggers, who would promote songs, often performing them
in department stores, city streets, and other public spaces; to vaudeville,
nightclub, and Broadway stages, where well-known performers could
greatly increase a song’s sales and, conversely, where a new Tin Pan
Alley hit could create a new star; and, later, to radio broadcasts, sound
recordings, and motion pictures.

In this production of what Theodor Adorno derided as “light music,”
Tin Pan Alley exemplified the rationalization of the culture industry by
reducing aesthetic experience to catchy rhythms and commodified senti-
ment and turning musical expression into a tautological advertisement
for the music industry itself. Though “Stormy Weather,” for example,
was written for The Cotton Club Parade, Waters’ performance was likely
not the first time her audience heard the song. The number was recorded
no less than four times in the five months before its nightclub debut. Vic-
tor, Brunswick, and Columbia (which did both a big band and a vocal
version) all released versions of the song by white bandleaders. In this
way, record sales and radio broadcasts helped to publicize the upcoming
Cotton Club Parade, which in turn would help to promote further sales
of the song. Shortly after the show opened, Waters herself performed
“Stormy Weather” live on NBC radio, even further expanding the Cot-
ton Club’s audience across the nation. These interlocked technologies
illustrate the economics and systems of distribution at the emergence of
the modern music industry.

But even as Tin Pan Alley managed, standardized, and, most impor-
tantly, profited from the heterogeneous sounds of American popular
culture, it was also a site of interracial collaboration and conflict. Tin
Pan Alley adapted the sounds of ethnic white neighborhoods and black
music and urban blues into a musical public sphere, universalizing sen-
timent and shaping a national culture based on a standardized aesthetic
experience and musical form. The centralization of Tin Pan Alley in New
York City made interracial collaboration and contact a common source
of musical compositions, facilitated by an urban performance scene that
brought black and Jewish performers into social and musical contact.
Harold Arlen, for example, was mentored by black bandleaders Fletcher
Henderson and Will Marion Cook early in his career, and his songs, along
with those of George Gershwin, were among the Tin Pan Alley compositions most attuned to black sounds and the rhythms of black performance in New York City. Such collaborations made popular songs rich sites for the sonic articulation and negotiation of dynamic social processes inaugurated by migration, immigration, and urbanization.

As the recording industry came to replace the sheet music industry as the primary site of capital, Tin Pan Alley compositions turned much more directly to African-American vernacular sounds. Capitalizing on the rise of race records and the “Negro vogue” of the 1920s, Tin Pan Alley, as Ann Douglas notes, “produced more than two hundred songs with ‘Blues’ in the title” between 1920 and 1928. Modifying the twelve-bar form of the classic blues into the thirty two-bar structure of the Tin Pan Alley standard and employing white songwriters and more commercially refined black vocalists, the mass-marketing of blackness by these songs connoted a middle-brow consumption and racial inauthenticity that many opposed—at the time and, often, since—to both the blues feminism and African-American modernism of classic blues singers like Bessie Smith or Gertrude “Ma” Rainey and to the Paris noir modernism of Josephine Baker. Ethel Waters and Lena Horne, who both made their careers singing the standardized love songs produced by Tin Pan Alley before primarily white audiences, would seem to be outside of such traditions, more easily displaced on the other side of the color line as interpreters of white (or Jewish) popular sounds.

Yet when we look more closely, the modernist uses of Tin Pan Alley can be found in both its lyrical and musical registers. Musicologist Philip Furia argues, for example, that a large number of Tin Pan Alley lyrics were characterized by wit, irony, paradox, and novelty—the same tropes that the New Critics would come to value most about modern poetry. Ulf Lindberg similarly argues that Tin Pan Alley songs responded to and mediated processes of modernization by fashioning an urbane individualism and cosmopolitan outlook through their lyrics, contributing to a “popular modernism” that shaped modern sensibilities through a popular idiom. Many black performers sonically marked their relationship to the popular music industry by a kind of citation and circulation that folded Tin Pan Alley standards into their compositions and reformed them, marking blackness as both containing and contained by—both before and after—American popular music as such. Most crucially in this tradition, Billie Holiday sonically inscribed Tin Pan Alley love songs with a blues modernism that, through her vocal performance, rewrote their commodifiable narratives of gender, sex, and romance. In a different kind of inscription, Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington both incorporated
Gershwin songs into their own performances. In “Ain’t Misbehavin’,”
Armstrong cited and modified Gershwin’s jazz symphony *Rhapsody in
Blue*, and Ellington similarly included a sample of Gershwin’s bluesy
ballad “Summertime” in his “I Got it Bad (And That Ain’t Good),” a
song composed for his 1941 theatrical revue *Jump for Joy*. As Jeffrey
Melnick suggests, in slyly pointing to the exchange and expropriation
that structured Tin Pan Alley, Armstrong and Ellington both spotlighted
the “very porous boundaries” that existed between “those cultural pro-
ductions that would be identified as ‘black’ and ‘Jewish’.”

We might also add to this list of popular experimentations black radical poet and
songwriter Andy Razaf’s *Kitchen Mechanic’s Revue*, in which the leftist
lyricist incorporated working-class critique into the 1930 floorshow at
Small’s Paradise (another Harlem nightclub) using the form and conven-
tions of popular song and vaudeville staging.

It is in this context that I want to approach some key performances
of “Stormy Weather” within a tradition of African-American modern-
ism, understood as a critical expressive engagement with the aesthetic,
historical, and social configurations of blackness as imagined and lived
in the modern world. As the examples of Holiday, Armstrong, and
Ellington suggest, we often need to look at the song in performance to
recognize how it might have stood in excess of—even as it was embed-
ded within—the standardizing and rationalizing impulse of corporate
musical production and the universalizing abstractions of the mass pub-
lic sphere. As music historian Charles Hamm argues, like “the similar
restrictions embraced by the writers of sonnets, by the Japanese poets
of haiku verse, and by the great American bluesmen,” Tin Pan Alley
composers were able to accomplish an astonishing degree of novelty
and innovation within the formal and corporate structures of popular
music. This is as true, if not more so, of those who performed these
songs. After its stage debut by Ethel Waters, “Stormy Weather” quickly
emerged as a nightclub standard, the class of popular song that a singer
is always prepared to perform and that an audience is always prepared
to recognize. As a musical category, the standard signals a performance
paradox: though formulaic, recognizable, and easily added to a repertoire,
in performance each singer undoes the standard’s corporate musical
production and marks the song with his or her own musical signature.
The standard becomes the fundamental material for improvisation and
originality. In the hands of a singer like Ethel Waters or Lena Horne,
that is to say, the song takes on another meaning of standard—that of a
banner by which one announces her advance.

This act of making a standard “your own” is an act of repetition and
revision, one that highlights the gap between printed score and live
performance and calls for a reconsideration of the Romantic myth that locates artistic genius in the modern figure of the solitary writer or composer. In histories of popular music, performers are often subordinated to songwriters (like Arlen) who receive the credit for shaping a popular genre. Performers are taken as merely interpreters of the musical genius of the songwriter, rather than as active collaborators. Women performers, in particular, were rarely accorded the access to publishing and composition that men were. Their innovation often took place in performance itself, and the tradition of the standard must be seen as a way that women performers could intervene in the production and creation of a popular song, allowing the performing female voice to exist not only as a means of expression but also as an active musical collaborator. Moreover, the phenomenon of the standard compels us to see the song as both an object and a process, allowing its rich historicity to come into view. Songs, in other words, accumulate multiple meanings as they are performed, reinterpreted, and improvised by different artists, meanings that exceed the textual record as either printed lyric or musical notation. In their instantiation, songs may inscribe their historical moments with echoes of past performances. They are simultaneously reinscribed by these subsequent and successive enactments. Se15 Seen in this way, popular song’s relationship to modernism should be understood not simply as raw material and cultural detritus for writers and poets to refashion into literary form (as T. S. Eliot, Vachel Lindsay, Stephen Crane, and other modernists did), but also as material through which performers themselves could mediate and narrate cultural change.

“Stormy Weather” provides an example of how a fugitive black modernism could transport itself on the byways of popular musical thoroughfares, remapping the cartography of American culture in the process. When put back into the context of its significant performances in the first half of the twentieth century, it stands as a highly self-reflexive engagement with and critique of the course of black American performance history. Waters, Horne, and Dunham reinscribed “Stormy Weather,” stowing away within its melodic contours to articulate a modernist perspective on the nationalization of American music and its racial unconscious. This perspective marked the terms and conditions of commodified black performance, offering an interpretive response to the burden of representation that bound black performance to limited and limiting conceptions of the particular, the immanent, and the sexual. As I approach “Stormy Weather” through the methods of performance history and analysis, I also put it in dialogue with other black modernists such as Langston Hughes and James Baldwin. In doing so, I mean to augment and supplement textual notions of modernism—identified by such
literary strategies as narrative fragmentation, typographic innovation, formal experimentation, deformations of dominant forms, and thematic rebellion—by looking to performance elements like directorial vision, mise-en-scène, theatrical effects, vocal manipulation, and kinesthetic rewriting. Among other things, this approach will help us to see how “Stormy Weather” allowed for expressions of African-American modernism within and against the mass cultures of the early twentieth century.

Let’s return, then, to Ethel Waters, standing alone on the Cotton Club stage, leaning against a lamppost, before a log cabin. “Stormy Weather” was the centerpiece of that season’s spring revue, a pause in the frenetic energy that characterized most all-black nightclub revues. The nightclub revue was a plotless performance mode built around vaudeville-inspired acts, ribald comedy sketches, spectacular chorus numbers, and popular songs. These revues, with scores of cast members, showcased black performance and choreography primarily scripted, designed, and staged by white writers, composers, and directors. The Cotton Club began offering two revues a year when it opened in 1923 (their revues became known as the Cotton Club Parades in 1931, after Arlen and Koehler premiered their song “I Love a Parade” in that year’s spring show). The Parades competed with other well-known revue franchises like Lew Leslie’s Blackbird revues, Florenz Ziegfeld’s Follies, George White’s Scandals, and Earl Carroll’s Vanities. The Cotton Club Parades distinguished themselves by consistently featuring the most renowned black entertainers of the day. The nightclub’s house bands were led at different times by Duke Ellington (1927–1931), Cab Calloway (1931–1934), and Jimmie Lunceford (1934–1936), and performers like Waters, Lena Horne, Dorothy Dandridge, Bill Robinson, George Dewey Washington, Aida Ward, Adelaide Hall, and the Nicholas Brothers all gave the revues national recognition. The nightclub, moreover, promised a performance environment that allowed the audience to consume Prohibition-era alcohol and to take over the dance floor between acts.17

The Cotton Club Parade of 1933 was the twenty-second edition of the nightclub’s musical revues. The show had eighteen fast-paced scenes, hurried along by producer and director Dan Healy. Waters’ “Stormy Weather” scene, following several blackout skits, “plantation songs,” chorus routines, comic bits, and naughty ballads, was titled “Cabin in the Cotton Club,” situating her performance at a juncture of the folk and the cosmopolitan. In this juxtaposition, the production capitalized on the mise-en-scène of the Cotton Club itself, which combined jungle designs with antebellum plantation motifs in its décor and publicity. Mercer Ellington, son of Duke, recalled that “the stage was set up to represent the
Land of Cotton, with a plantation cabin, rows of cotton bushes, and trees that shot up when the show started.” Such embellishments were vestiges of the nineteenth-century minstrel stage and melodrama that survived in the Cotton Club *Parades* and in modern performances of race in other Harlem floorshows. This theme and design, reported Ellington, “represented not the South of the aristocrats but the South of the Negro. The people that came there wanted what they thought was the red-hot feeling of the South as depicted by Negroes. No white acts could work there.”

These set pieces and interior designs helped to shape the spectatorial cues and theatrical possibilities of the all-black revue throughout the 1920s and 1930s. As kinetic, spectacle-driven performances, there was little need for interpretive work, for either the spectator or the performer. As it was initially rehearsed, for example, “Stormy Weather” was to be a show-stopping spectacle, incorporating a number of mechanical devices to create storm effects—wind, thunder, lightning—in order to theatrically literalize the words of the song during Waters’ performance. This literal realization of the song’s words would have brought the number in line with nightclub revue’s dominant aesthetic of action, speed, motion, and novelty.

But Waters performed “Stormy Weather” against the Cotton Club’s aesthetic imperatives and dramatically rewrote the theatrical semiotics of the nightclub revue. After taking the song home overnight to learn it, she convinced the show’s director to drop these effects and allow her to approach the scene from a different direction. “I told them,” she wrote, “that the piece should have more to do with human emotions and should be expressed that way instead of with noise-making machines to interpret the rumblings and rattlings of Old Mother Nature.” At first glance, this rejection of technology and Waters’ anthropomorphizing of “Mother Nature” might appear as a rejection of modernization and an appeal to folk knowledge. In the context of Jim Crow performance culture, however, such modern technology worked to spectacularize black performance within a totalizing hermeneutic framework that gave black performers little interpretive room and trained white audiences to see and hear blackness in narrowly circumscribed ways. Cotton Club revues and other segregated Harlem nightclub performances, like those at Connie’s Inn and Small’s Paradise, drew from a long-established principle of literalism that framed and governed the staging of black performance and circumscribed popular representations of blackness. This literalism, not to be confused with realism or verisimilitude, enforced a direct correspondence between the idea expressed and its representation. It was an aesthetic principle that sought to contain excess meaning and
functioned as a popular technology of U.S. racism—in, for example, the minstrel show and the melodrama—to withhold black subjectivity from the popular stage by refusing access to abstraction and binding blackness to embodied particularity.

Against this nightclub tradition, Waters despectacularized “Stormy Weather.” Rather than have an interpretation imposed on her performance by visual effects and “noise-making machines,” she forged an interpretive space on the Cotton Club stage. This resistance to the aesthetic conventions of vaudeville was something Waters had cultivated in the years before _The Cotton Club Parade_. Randall Cherry finds, for example, that in earlier performances of “Sweet Georgia Brown” and “Dinah,” Waters “demarcates her area of vocal authority: a popular song that draws equally on elements of blues, jazz, and vaudeville and that demands, if it is to be put over properly, a deep understanding of language, a mastery of enunciation, and a sense of characterization.”

Grounding her performance in this vocal authority, Waters substituted technological sound effects with her own voice for the staging of “Stormy Weather”; her voice, in other words, became a modern technology, replacing effects with affects and redeploying the popular song in the service of an African-American modernist critique. Waters herself directs us to see this performance as modernist, rather than as another presentation of the simple sentimentality that usually defined the performance of popular ballads featured in nightclub revues. “When I got out there in the middle of the Cotton Club floor,” she later wrote of performing “Stormy Weather,” “I was telling the things I couldn’t frame in words. I was singing the story of my misery and confusion, of the misunderstandings in my life I couldn’t straighten out, the story of the wrongs and outrages done to me by people I had loved and trusted.”

The lyrics of the song were not primarily important for their sentimental narrative or for their literal references to sad feelings. While her account of the performance gestures toward the circumstances of her private life—her second marriage had recently ended—it was also clearly more than that. Or, to put this another way, the performance was something in excess of her particular circumstances, which had made themselves available for her to sound a narrative of outrage, disruption, and misunderstanding—“the things I couldn’t frame in words.” Bringing psychological depth and affective realism to the segregated nightclub stage, she redirected the revue away from spectacle and toward interiority. In refusing the aesthetic constraints imposed by the all-black revue, Waters expanded the conventions and possibilities of the form itself and, in a very real sense, invented a new mode of American cabaret performance.
In using “Stormy Weather” as an occasion to tell the things she “couldn’t frame in words,” her performance evoked a tradition of Atlantic modernism that Paul Gilroy calls the “topos of unsayability” and Angela Davis calls the “capacity to speak the unspeakable.” For both critics, this topos of unsayability, found in instances of black music, refers to the expression and transmission of pained histories and experiences that are rendered unspeakable by both the historical conditions that produced them and the overwhelming heartache that they produce. Waters drew from her personal story of “misery and confusion” to refashion the universalizing and standardizing form of the Tin Pan Alley ballad as a way to express the unsayable. Such a formal transformation of the song connected Waters’s “Stormy Weather” to the historical discontinuities of slavery in a very different way than did the southern plantation motifs of the Cotton Club. And unlike any previous act of her revue career, performing this number took a high emotional toll on her. Despite the fact that the nightclub scheduled multiple shows a night, in her negotiations for the engagement Waters insisted on the unprecedented condition to perform “Stormy Weather” only once each evening.

Offering neither the individuated feelings of the sentimental love lament nor the plantation nostalgia and racial romanticism required by the Cotton Club’s mise-en-scène, Waters evoked a collective feeling of weariness that signaled a central mode of black modernity’s topos of unsayability. Koehler’s lyrics are apposite: “Stormy weather / Just can’t get my poor old self together / I’m weary all the time, the time / So weary all of the time.” Weariness as an affective state and existential condition was articulated in African-American modernism as a response to legacies of enslavement and exploited labor, psychic double consciousness, and the assaults of modern life. Another Harlem modernist, Langston Hughes, theorized weariness as a physical and existential condition that was part of the historical production of racial difference. In his poetry collection *The Weary Blues* (1926) and in other writing, Hughes formulates weariness as both the blues’ keystone and the state the blues is sung to redress. The modernist blues tradition, in this formulation, offers a revolt, in Hughes’ words, “against weariness in a white world, a world of subway trains, and work, work, work.” Hughes’ repetition and the repetition in “Stormy Weather” (“Weary all the time, the time / So weary all of the time”) reinforces the persistence of racial labor and the laboring of race. Weariness, for Hughes and for Waters, was scripted and sung as a mode of critique of modern racial life and expressed, despite its unsayability, from the stage of Harlem’s most iconic location of segregated performance.
In another important modernist deviation that would echo through subsequent performances of “Stormy Weather,” the Waters scene included a dance sequence. At the musical bridge of the song’s second half, the Cotton Club’s famous dancers seemed to virtually materialize around her, dissolving into the scene with the help of special lighting effects (See Fig. 1). Following their dance number, Waters was joined by co-star George Dewey Washington to reprise the chorus. Such staging presented Waters against her kinesthetic type. Until “Stormy Weather” became her signature song, she was well known for her suggestive dancing, honed early in her career in the working-class speakeasies and saloons where she popularized the shimmy and was known to “show her laundry,” the nightlife term for lifting your dress and flashing your underwear for a raucous crowd.\(^{25}\) In more respectable all-black Broadway revues like _Africana_ (1927), _The Blackbirds of 1928_ (1930), and _Rhapsody in Black_ (1931), she was featured as much for her choreographic turns as for her vocal ones. In her _Cotton Club Parade_ performance, however, Waters stood still before streetlight props, separating sound from motion and using the stillness of her body to relocate racial knowledge production from black physicality to her voice, from exteriority to interiority. In the context of the black musical revue and the history of black performance, such stillness provided an aesthetic gap between the expectations of the white audience for physical, highly sexualized dance routines and the staging of “Stormy Weather.” While Waters was not responsible for the direction or composition of the show, we have already seen how she nonetheless successfully reimagined the dramaturgy of the song. Waters, at least, would also have recognized the theatrical and historical effect of juxtaposing her stillness with the “Stormy Weather” chorus routine that followed her vocal performance. Through both her vocal interpretation and her choreographic choices, Waters staged herself simultaneously within and against histories of black representation, advancing a modernist critique of naturalized and standardized black performance.

During the performance run of _The Cotton Club Parade of 1933_, a sixteen-year-old Lena Horne auditioned for a part in the chorus of the Cotton Club’s next show. While Cotton Club _Parades_ continued to play throughout the 1930s, the genre of the all-black nightclub revue became increasingly anachronistic, particularly as Harlem itself waned as a fashionable nightlife district. Fewer white New Yorkers came uptown to see black performance, prompting the Cotton Club to move downtown to Times Square in 1936 and to close for good in 1940. Horne was in the chorus of the club’s 1933 fall show and had a featured role in the spring
Parade of 1934. She used this visibility and her connections at the Cotton Club to land parts on Broadway and on a national tour with Noble Sissle’s orchestra before making a transition to Hollywood. With her middle-class background and image of sophistication and refinement, civil rights organizations were eager to use Horne’s success in Hollywood to expand possibilities for black actresses beyond the existing stereotypes that marked Hollywood’s color line.26

Even as the all-black musical revue was in decline, traces of this popular genre made their way into mass circulation through a series of black-cast Hollywood studio musicals produced from the 1930s to the 1950s.27 Among a number of smaller roles in mostly white films, Horne starred in two black-cast Hollywood musicals, Cabin in the Sky (1943) and Stormy Weather (1943).28 The latter film revived The Cotton Club Parade of 1933 for a mass audience and featured a crucial citation of “Stormy Weather.” Horne’s performance of this song, and its accompaniment by modern dancer Katherine Dunham in a fantasy ballet sequence, reinscribed Waters’ signature song. This reinscription, however, was not an erasure but a palimpsestic sounding that continued
Waters’ earlier modernist enactment. The entire film, and especially this title song, exemplifies a sonic intertextuality and reverberation that is grounded in the tradition of “motivated and unmotivated revision” that Henry Louis Gates, Jr., suggests is one of the central characteristics of African-American expressive culture.29

Directed by the otherwise unnoteworthy director Andrew Stone, *Stormy Weather* translated the nightclub revue to the screen more successfully than any other cinematic attempt. Set in the urban and cosmopolitan milieu of nightlife performance, it was the only all-black studio musical that did not take place in a folk setting. As a backstage musical—that genre of storytelling that traces the relationships and antics of show folk as they put on a show—the film is organized by a series of disconnected musical numbers supported by the barest of plots: tap performer Bill Williamson, played by real-life tap performer Bill Robinson, romantically pursues nightclub singer Selina Rogers, played by nightclub singer Lena Horne, as their careers intersect over the course of several years. As these character names suggest, the film drew on the national reputation of its stars in order to evoke the historical Cotton Club performances of the previous decade in its fictional narrative. Indeed, the film provided a vehicle through which the personalities of Jazz Age Harlem performed their own mythology. Other luminaries of the black nightclub-and-vaudeville circuit portrayed themselves in the film, including James Reese Europe, Cab Calloway, Fats Waller, Ada Brown, and the Nicholas Brothers. Clarence Robinson, the first black choreographer employed by the Cotton Club, designed several of the film’s dance sequences. Irving Mills, formerly the manager of both Calloway and Duke Ellington, produced it. In its cast, its creative vision, and its title number, the film not only referenced the historical performances of the Cotton Club and other segregated nightclubs, but also, as we will see, staged an explicit citation of Waters’ performance in *The Cotton Club Parade of 1933*.

By 1943, the performances of blackness in *Stormy Weather* seemed to many to be an anachronistic product of an earlier historical consciousness. Among criticisms of the film was the very public dispute between the studio and black classical composer William Grant Still, who was hired to supervise the musical arrangement. He joined the film with the understanding that it would be an opportunity to showcase black cultural achievement in theatre and concert music, but as his compositions were increasingly discarded in lieu of more stereotypical musical numbers, he quickly realized that it would rely wholly on the familiar material of the nightclub stage. Frustrated by the eagerness of the studio to discard his symphonic arrangements and unwilling to contribute to what he felt
was the perpetuation of exploitative aspects of the all-black revue, he left the production. Citing “musical and personal reasons,” he explained in the pages of *The Chicago Defender* that “my conscience would not let me accept money to help carry on a tradition directly opposed to the welfare of thirteen million people.”

Without discounting Still’s objections, I want to suggest that *Stormy Weather* was more than just a nostalgic backward glance at a rapidly vanishing era of black performance. While it was this, some of the performances in the film manage to articulate a critique of the film’s conditions of aesthetic possibility and can be seen as a reflection on the fraught historical trajectory of black American performance and white spectatorship. To help explain how we might see this film as something other than the mass reproduction of black subordination perpetuated through the racialized spectatorship of segregated nightlife, I want to turn to James Baldwin’s review of another black-cast Hollywood musical, *Porgy and Bess* (1959). In this review, Baldwin offers incisive guidelines for apprehending the dynamic between white film directors and early black Hollywood. The supposition, Baldwin writes, that “the director knows more than his actors, knows, that is, how to get the best out of them, as individual performers and as an ensemble,” is rarely borne out when white directors take on black casts. In most cases, Baldwin cautions, the white director in the studio system of Hollywood knows little about the life, history, and culture of his cast. Black casts generally resign themselves to this fact “with as much sardonic good nature as they can muster. They are working, at least, and they will be seen; this part may lead to a better part or even better parts for others. So the disaster proceeds and the miracle is that even in so thoroughgoing a disaster as *Porgy and Bess* a couple of very effective moments are achieved.”

This tension that Baldwin identifies gives us one way to approach Jim Crow-era black Hollywood and helps us to see how *Stormy Weather*, despite Still’s frustration with the movie’s musical arrangement, offered an unlikely location of black modernist critique. Baldwin calls for a separation of the film’s directorial vision from specific performances that exceed and transcend the film and its off-screen epistemologies, directing us to moments when the film seems to gesture beyond itself—surplus moments he describes as miraculous. While most of *Stormy Weather* recreates the vaudeville and minstrel-inspired performances of the black popular stage—with stereotyped scenes of tap dancing, shuffling, and blackface in settings like a Mississippi riverboat, a Beale Street blues dive, and a variety theatre—there is one sequence that steps out of this tradition to cast a self-reflexive and aestheticized gaze on the history it
both recreates and perpetuates. Once again, that is to say, the title song “Stormy Weather” provided a vehicle through which a counter-tradition of black modernism and performance could be articulated.

This sequence begins with Horne performing in a lavish cabaret, before linen-draped tables and well-dressed black spectators. The cabaret stage is set as a modest sitting room in a bourgeois apartment. Through an open window in the center of the rear wall is visible a cityscape of surprising verisimilitude, as well as flashes of lightning and a heavy downpour of rain—more of the literalism that doggedly pursues this song. Horne begins the song at the window and eventually moves onto the dance floor and among the patrons at their tables (See Fig. 2). As she comes to the instrumental bridge in the song, the orchestra and storm effects surge and she rushes to close the window as the curtains blow about. The camera follows her to the window and then moves past her, taking us out of the cabaret and into the street. In a scene that could not possibly be behind the flat on the cabaret platform, in a performance that the film’s internal audience could not possibly witness, Horne watches a group of black urban pedestrians seeking refuge from the stormy weather under an elevated train platform. The musical score continues uninterrupted from the nightclub scene as the pedestrians pair up and begin an unhurried jitterbug.

Among the performers playing pedestrians in this impossible scene is black anthropologist and choreographer Katherine Dunham. She rebuffs her potential dance partner and instead gazes upwards into the storm clouds. The scene dissolves into a fantasy ballet sequence, where Dunham and her troupe perform a choreographic routine that, like the Cotton Club dancers of a decade earlier, complements the vocal performance. But rather than a nightclub dance floor, Dunham and her company enter onto a concert stage, their street clothes replaced with theatrical dance costumes. The costumes, musical cues, and set design all signify a tropical scene. Wind still blows across the stage, linking this theatre to the streetscape. But here, in place of storm effects, torn muslin strips billow cumulonimbusly over the stage, suggesting both storm clouds and the sails of great ships. This abstract representation of stormy weather undoes the suffocating aesthetics of literalism that governed black performance, made all the more totalizing in the age of cinema. Dunham’s entrance is marked by a rhythmic, syncopated arrangement of “Stormy Weather” that quickly segues into a symphonic orchestration. She and her troupe present her critically and popularly regarded modern choreography, integrating movements and gestures from African and Afro-Caribbean
ritual dance, African-American vernacular dance, and European classical dance and ballet (See Fig. 3).

*Stormy Weather* was not the first time Dunham’s concert dance was filmed—she and her company performed in the Warner Brothers’ short film *Carnival of Rhythm* (1941) and had a featured number in the patriotic Paramount revue *Star Spangled Rhythm* (1942)—but it was the first mass representation of black concert dance on a concert stage. Coming after earlier scenes of tap dancing, cakewalking, and vaudeville acrobatics, Dunham’s performance marks a choreographic contradiction within the film between the history of stereotyped minstrel dance and the emergence of modern Negro dance by artists like Pearl Primus, Edna Guy, Asadata Dafora, and Dunham herself. As the scene moves from singer to dancers and then returns to Horne to reprise the lyrics, the original *Cotton Club Parade of 1933* reverberates through the film. But here, Dunham’s kinesthetic rewriting of “Stormy Weather” situates the song and its racial inscription within a diasporic rather than a national horizon. Dunham, who studied anthropology with Robert Redfield and Melville Herskovitz at the University of Chicago, based her concept of modernist black dance on ethnographic research she carried out in Haiti, Jamaica, Trinidad, and Martinique. She refashioned this ethnographic
work into formal choreographic programs for the theatrical concert stage as an aesthetic response to modernization and histories of the black Atlantic. Her choreographic agenda was to develop a technique that would “take our dance out of the burlesque.” In performances like *Tropics and Le Jazz “Hot”* (1940) and *Tropical Review* (1943), Dunham brought gestures from 1920s black social dance onto the same stage as classical dance movements, developing what dance scholar Susan Manning describes as a “movement vocabulary that integrated principles from ballet and modern dance with principles from Black Atlantic dance forms.”

As Dunham’s formal modern ballet softens gradually by the end of “Stormy Weather” into more fluent movements centered on the pelvis and a relaxed upper body, we see—as homage, as critique, as citation—traces of vernacular black dance. The symphonic musical arrangement of the song returns to the tropical polyrhythmic sound with which it began. Some dancers, arms raised and bent at the elbow, do a stylized version of the shimmy, transforming for the concert stage the upper-body movement that Ethel Waters was known for doing on the saloon stage. What was imagined as a stereotypical association of physicality and naturalness in black performance is revealed instead by Dunham’s cho-

Figure 3. Katherine Dunham performing “Stormy Weather” on a concert dance stage in the film *Stormy Weather* (Twentieth Century Fox).
reography to be the product of technical precision and put into syncretic conversation with European dance traditions. In short, Dunham and her troupe, occupying the role originally held by the Cotton Club’s chorus girls, offered a modernist revision of the racial aesthetic of the black nightclub tradition and restaged the history of black performance. With a final thunderclap, the fantasy ballet is broken. The camera returns us first to the street scene—where Dunham moves on into the rain with a shrug and a sideways glance at the mundane world she inhabits—then back through the window where Horne, from her cabaret set, has been viewing the history Dunham dances.

_Stormy Weather_ should be understood as a specific and explicit citation of _The Cotton Club Parade of 1933_. The film, and especially Dunham’s sequence, is remarkable in itself, but viewed within the song’s previous iterations, it becomes even more aesthetically complex and historically significant. Like the lighting effects in _The Cotton Club Parade_ that allowed dancers to fade onto the stage, _Stormy Weather_ uses cinematic techniques to dissolve from the nightclub to a staged dance; in Dunham’s choreography and Horne’s reprise, “Stormy Weather” is again used to convey histories, movements, and feelings that couldn’t be framed in words. The performances echo each other, moving from the literal to the abstract and expanding the standardizing forms that contain them. Behind the film, we find the cabaret performance. Behind Lena Horne’s signature song, we find Ethel Waters. And behind Waters, we find the mixed elements of black and Jewish musical diasporas, just as behind Dunham, we find the substance of Black Atlantic movement. These routes of “Stormy Weather” suggest how an African-American modernism might be elaborated through the sonic, theatrical, cinematic, and choreographic materials of popular and mass culture. Beyond being a popular standard in any individual singer’s repertoire, “Stormy Weather” comprises a historical repertoire of black performance that signals the transmission and transformations of an African-American modernism.

NOTES

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6. See Melnick, *A Right to Sing the Blues* and “Tin Pan Alley.”


15. A number of other examples will verify this point. We can think here of Paul Robeson’s various rewritings of Jerome Kern and Oscar Hammerstein’s “Ol’ Man River” in performance as he turned the neo-minstrel song into an anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist, anti-racist anthem. The history of Abel Meeropol’s / Billie Holiday’s “Strange Fruit,” another collaboration between a Jewish male songwriter and black performer, similarly articulates both modernist critique and modernist subjectivity (see David Margolick, *Strange Fruit: Billie Holiday, Café Society, and an Early Cry for Civil Rights* [Philadelphia: Running Press, 2000]). And more recently, as Daphne Brooks proposed in a presentation at the 2005 American Studies Association, we can refer to Mary J. Blige’s reinscription of U2’s “One” on the Hurricane Katrina Relief Concert simulcast on all major television networks that year. See also Charles Hamm’s discussion of Irving Berlin and genre, in which he argues that “the meaning of a piece of popular music is shaped most importantly at the moment of performance” and that “this meaning can change from performance to performance” (*Putting Popular Music in Its Place* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995], 370).


35. Dunham’s kinesthetic transformation of the Cotton Club’s chorus number into concert dance echoes the musical transformation of “Stormy Weather” from a Tin Pan Alley song into art music through symphonic arrangement. Friedwald, for example, notes that in the film, the arrangement of the title song “seems inspired by the idea of treating [it] as what ‘Summertime’ was also fast becoming, a sort of bridge between the musical worlds of high art (classical) and low (which at that time would have meant jazz and pop music)” (*Stardust Melodies*, 295). Denning describes this impulse as the “fusion of philharmonic traditions and vernacular musics” that transformed American sound in the early twentieth century (*The Cultural Front*, 283). When Still quit the film over the musical arrangement, he cited the orchestrations for this scene, referring to the movement towards syncopated vernacular rhythms at the end as the deciding factor. “The final stab,” he wrote, “came when a ballet idealization I had made out of the song ‘Stormy Weather’ was thrown out as being ‘too polite, too light’ and not sexy enough” (Still, “William Grant Still Tells,” 19).

36. Two other minor performances of “Stormy Weather” that were staged in the immediate wake of its success in *The Cotton Club Parade of 1933* deserve mention here. About a month after Waters debuted the song, its composer Harold Arlen performed “Stormy Weather” as a divertissement in a Radio City Music Hall variety show that subsequently toured on the Loews theatre circuit. Accompanying himself on the piano, Arlen was backed up by a black chorus that included singer Katherine Handy, the daughter of composer W. C. Handy. Known as the “father of the blues,” W. C. Handy was the first African-American composer to transcribe and publish the blues in Tin Pan Alley’s publishing system. The image of Handy’s daughter as part of the choral ensemble to Arlen’s song highlights the practices and contradictions that governed Tin Pan Alley’s black-Jewish musical relations (Friedwald, *Stardust Melodies*, 285–86). At about the same time, Duke Ellington filmed a short film for Paramount Pictures titled *Bundle of Blues* in
which he and his orchestra performed three numbers. The second number was “Stormy Weather,” sung by jazz performer Ivie Anderson. Anderson begins singing in a gown on a nightclub stage with Ellington, and then the scene dissolves to a rural farmhouse during a thunderstorm, where Anderson, now in a housecoat, continues singing as she gazes forlornly out her window. The song transforms her, in other words, from a glamorous cosmopolitan chanteuse to a rural folk figure. The song is accompanied by pastoral images of the rain and puddles outside her window. While the scene of Anderson at the window anticipates Horne’s filmic version a decade later, updated to an urban apartment, *Bundle of Blues* cinematically relies on the aesthetics of literalism that Waters was at that very moment rupturing on the Cotton Club stage (see *Hollywood Rhythm: The Best of Jazz and Blues, The Paramount Musical Short, Volume 1*, Kino Video 2001, K197 DVD).