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Black Bodies/White Cities: Le Corbusier in Harlem

Author(s): Mabel Wilson

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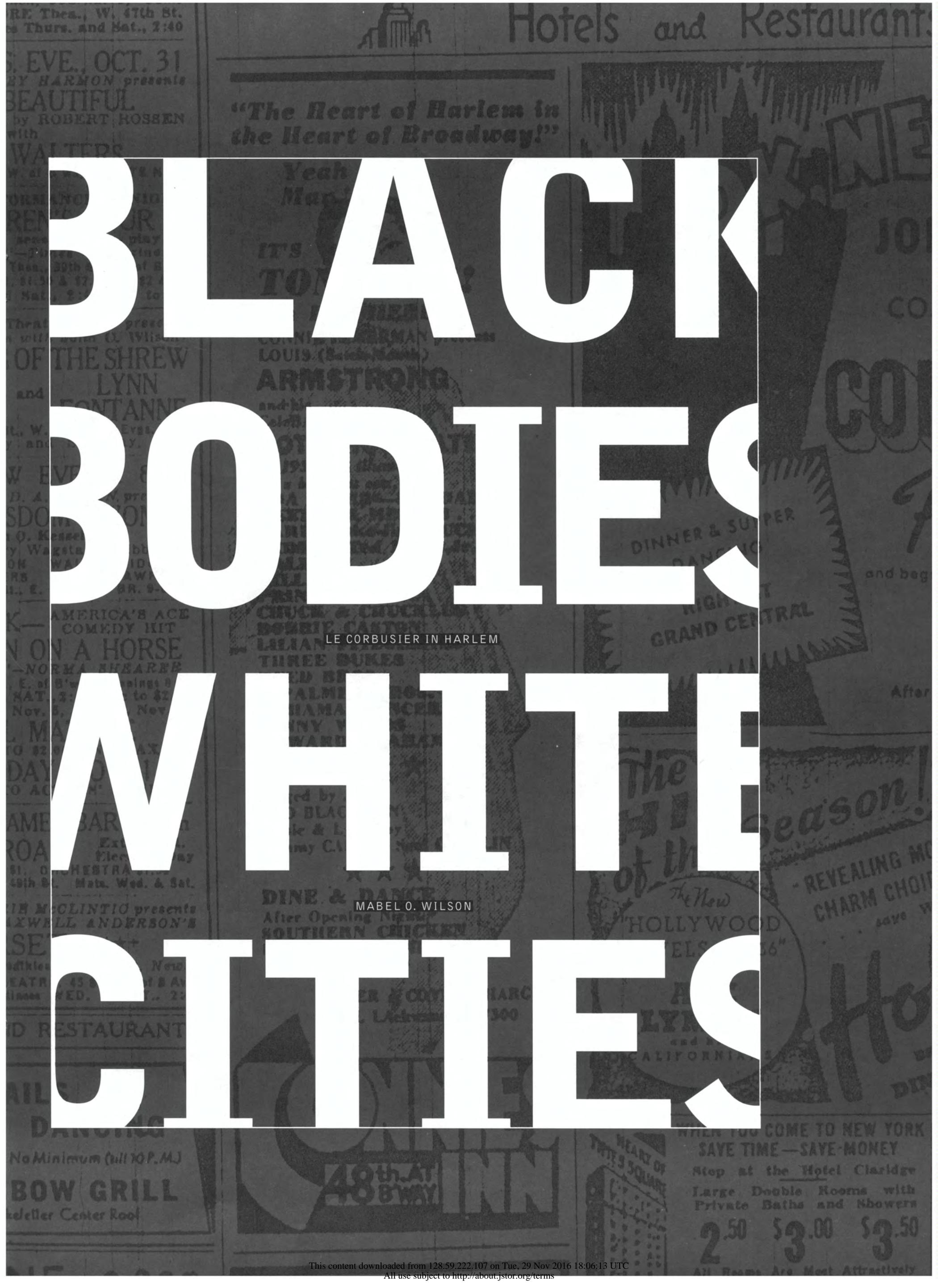
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BLAACK

BODDIES

LE CORBUSIER IN HARLEM

WHITTE

MABEL O. WILSON

PTTTES

Harlem! . . . The City that Never Sleeps! . . . A Strange, Exotic Island in the Heart of New York! . . . Rent Parties! . . . Number Runners! . . . Chippies! . . . Jazz Love! Primitive Passion!

—handbill, late 1920s

Harlem is still in the process of making. It is still new and mixed; so mixed that one may get many different views – which is all right so long as one view is not taken to be the whole picture.

—James Weldon Johnson, *Black Manhattan*

Whites go to Harlem. Blacks go to Greenwich Village. Manhattanites transgress racial boundaries – boundaries underwritten by social prohibitions and reinforced by the city's spatial order – and produce, in Ann Douglas's phrase, "Mongrel Manhattan" in the 1920s and early 1930s. This diverse milieu fostered the rise of a literati, numerous salons of artists, playwrights, actors, and musicians who together populated the Jazz Age. This moment saw an unprecedented coalescence of ideas on sexuality, race, and gender previously contained by traditional conventions of propriety.

Emblematic of this new sensibility was jazz, an African-American musical form. Jazz evolved from the remnants of African rhythms, slave folk songs, and blues tunes. Techniques of jazz performance and song migrated from New Orleans to Memphis to Louisville, Chicago and eventually New York, thus following the migration routes of Southern blacks to the industrial North. Jazz's complex rhythms and technique of improvisation made it a wholly modern musical genre that captured the ethos of the period and gave the era its title.

In the early 1920s only a handful of bohemian white New Yorkers, often the financial underwriters and promoters of the "Negro Arts," patronized the jazz and blues clubs of Harlem. Thanks to recordings and broadcasts on radio – inherently a color-blind medium – jazz's popularity grew. By mid-decade, Harlem was home to whites-only institutions such as the famed Cotton Club, a mafia-owned establishment that catered to slumming crowds hungry for a taste of authentic Negro musical fare. In these vast, ostentatiously decorated clubs, wealthy whites could quaff champagne and gin, sniff cocaine, dance the so-called illicit, body-contorting moves of the Charleston and blackbottom, ogle the tawdry floor shows of platinumed tans, and ballyhoo at the antics of bandleaders and comedians. The Cotton Club, the most famous of the cabarets, helped to establish the myth of the "savage primitive" Negro with its bawdy, rump-shaking choreography. Other clubs such as Connie's Inn were considered more musicians' meccas; owner Connie Immerman opened his doors to late-night jam sessions for performers drifting in after gigs at other clubs. Still, Connie's floor shows pandered to the common conception of blacks as always cheerful – singin' and shufflin'. The Jazz Age drew much of its color, clearly tempered by racist conventions, from the culture of Harlem, thus giving Manhattan its "black" tinge and, as Douglas notes, its mongrel pedigree.¹

The new jazz sound – particularly its smoother embodiment in Louis Armstrong's "swing" sound – was accompanied by a dance that drew upon its rhythms: the lindy hop. As a social dance the lindy's moves were low-slung gyrations and twists and "required music which contained more drive and momentum than earlier styles of dance music to sustain the steam of highly animated motion that characterized it."² The dance itself became associated with the popular Savoy Ballroom in Harlem. With racially integrated owners and patrons, the Savoy Ballroom was a unique venue. The low admission fee made it affordable to most. Its ornate decor beguiled and delighted both Harlemites and upper-crust whites who packed the dance floors seven nights a

week. The ballroom itself was a behemoth block-long hall on Lenox Avenue. Dance floors on two levels capable of holding up to 7,000 revelers were crowded with professional lindy hoppers who exhibited their athletic prowess at jumping, tossing, and swirling to the battling bands of Chick Webb and Count Basie. The hall was dimly lit with the bandstands on the far side of the room. According to one critic, "The wall behind [the bandstand] is painted into an extravagant blue background, and by means of trick spotlights, thin clouds seem to be drawn across it perpetually, giving the effect of motion and smoke."³ The ethereal atmosphere, the cavernous Savoy with its teeming crowd of black and white hoppers, epitomized "mongrel Manhattan."

At the same time, most of the black performers in the music circuit – bandleaders, singers, musicians, and dancers – often toiled under grueling performance schedules, received nominal pay for their labor, and were under the control of white managers and club owners who, in some cases, ruthlessly exerted their authority over uncooperative performers. These conditions were not limited to the music industry and were the result of wider racist labor practices that devalued the work of blacks. In many ways the band uniform – those crisp black tuxedos – was a uniform no different from those of the bartender, the doorman, or the waiter.

James Weldon Johnson's sweeping history of the settlement of Harlem, *Black Manhattan*, written in 1929, pays heed to the notion that Harlem's multifaceted culture transcends the reductive but popular epithets of "A Strange Exotic Island in the Heart of New York," "Jazz Love," and "Primitive Passion!" Many white patrons, captivated by Harlem's artistic and literary circles, employed various means (sociology, psychology, and anthropology; art, theatre, and architecture) to analyze and aestheticize this fascinating new Negro art. By the 1930s, mediated in this way by white interpreters, Harlem's culture came to represent, in the popular imagination, the American Negro's ethos. These literary works and cabaret shows paraded for enthusiastic white audiences a cavalcade of racialized personas: the simpleton Sambo, exotic high-yellow chlorine, buxom blues Mamma, smooth-struttin' band leader, and the ever grinnin' minstrel coon. This exaggeratedly corporeal "blackness" transposed onto the Harlemites falls under the rubric of the "exotic primitive." Even the cadre of Harlem Renaissance intellectuals – Langston Hughes, James Weldon Johnson, Jean Toomer,

Zora Neale Hurston, Countee Cullen, and others who attempted to promulgate and cultivate other sociocultural representations – had to negotiate these tenacious racial stereotypes.

Such representations of black identity, metaphorically denoted by "blackness," have for centuries delighted the imagination of Western thinkers. In *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, Toni Morrison writes that early Euro-Americans meditated upon the modalities of enslaved Africans in order to imagine their democratic nation, a supposedly enlightened sociopolitical body whose founding principles of freedom and liberty would guide the destiny of their new, enlightened civilization. The cultural hegemony of white identity is established in part by American writers who often situated within their prose and poetry an Africanist presence – a character, an event, or locale – connoted by metaphors of blackness. Literary greats Edgar Allan Poe, Willa Cather, Mark Twain, and Ernest Hemingway conjure up images of whiteness that are "empty," "mute," and "vacuous." This same whiteness, however, dynamically transforms when it encounters blackness, the presence of which incites complex dualities that can be both "evil and provocative, rebellious and forgiving, fearful and desirable." In these now canonic literary works, carefully deployed metaphors of blackness – Africanisms, to use Morrison's terminology



"Armstrong Endorses Selmer Trumpets"
Photo: Rockwell O'Keefe
Courtesy Institute of Jazz Studies, Rutgers University

¹Louis Armstrong Fronts Luis Russell Orchestra, 1936" Courtesy Louis Armstrong Estate and Queens College

— shuttle between dialectical pairs, thus working to construct and stabilize whiteness. The fervent imagination of both author and audience, in the process of writing and reading, reflexively constitutes a white American identity.

Morrison's understanding of whiteness on the level of literary representation proves extremely useful in examining how these same sociocultural forces of identity formation operate spatially and are thus underpinned by architecture and architectural discourse. In order to discern an Africanist presence in architecture, connoted by metaphors of "blackness," we must sift through a variety of ways in which architectural ideas and forms are conceptualized and circulated by architects through writing and drawing, as well as through building.

BEFORE THE CATHEDRALS WERE WHITE

On the stage of Armstrong's night club a series of dances follow each other, supported by the music and stimulating the body to frenzied gesticulation. Savagery is constantly present, particularly in the frightful murder scene which leaves you terrified; these naked Negroes, formidable black athletes, seem as if they were imported directly from Africa where there are still tom-toms, massacres, and the complete destruction of villages or tribes. Is it possible that such memories could survive through a century of being uprooted? It would seem that only butchery and agony could call forth such cries, gasps, roars.

—Le Corbusier, *When the Cathedrals Were White*

In the fall of 1935 Harlem's territory was subject to another exploration. Le Corbusier arrived in Manhattan from Paris to embark on a lecture tour through the Northeast and Midwest sponsored by the Museum of Modern Art. Having already forayed to Rio de Janeiro, Buenos Aires, Algiers, and Moscow, Le Corbusier, a consummate world traveler, discovered the waning Jazz Age culture of Manhattan. His perceptions of astonishment and disdain of what he terms a young fledgling society (its youth embodied in its vertiginous skyscrapers when measured against Europe's venerable cathedrals) appear in his book *When the Cathedrals Were White*, published in 1936. A companion piece to *The Radiant City* (1933), the book updates his urban theories. Compiled as a travelogue about his lecture tour to American universities and museums, *When the Cathedrals Were White* narrates, in a sometimes jocular tone, myriad other adventures, from delivering a radio broadcast from deep inside

the towers of Rockefeller Center to a delightful automobile excursion through the suburban parkways of Connecticut. Le Corbusier describes a colorful but restrained masquerade ball in Manhattan and relates the social nuances of a haughty business lunch at the Plaza Hotel in Manhattan. These events and others confirm his opinion that this young culture, nurtured by America's international economic prowess, exudes a raw physical energy that should be of interest to the culturally stagnant French.

During his stay in Manhattan Le Corbusier was treated to evenings at some of the popular cultural venues, including those within and associated with Harlem, such as the Savoy Ballroom and the recently opened downtown incarnation of Connie's Inn at Broadway and 49th Street, where he saw Louis Armstrong headlining a show called "The Hot Chocolates of 1936." These experiences are retold in the chapter "The Spirit of the Machine and Negroes in the USA." Louis Armstrong takes center stage. Le Corbusier beknights Armstrong "the black Titan of the cry, the apostrophe, of the burst of laughter, of thunder. He sings, he guffaws, he makes his silver trumpet spurt. He is mathematics, equilibrium on a tightrope . . . with Armstrong, the exactitude leads to an unearthly suavity, broken by a blow like a flash of lightning." Clearly in admiration of Armstrong's brilliance and artistry, Le Corbusier identifies a

regal composure: "He is in turn demonic, playful, massive, from one second to another, in accordance with an astounding fantasy. The man is extravagantly skillful; he is king." During the performance Armstrong incarnates brute physicality — emitting a fierce heat that combines with the driving rhythm of the drums and blare of the horns. Imbued with a sublime spirit, Armstrong's "voice is as deep as an abyss, it is a black cave." Paradoxically it is spirit in a material sense — a kind of black ore, raw matter, fueling the machines of the modern age. Le Corbusier simultaneously envies and dreads the "demonic" and "playful" Armstrong. In a complex association, Armstrong's corporeal and metaphoric blackness is emblematic of the primitive, a modality that in turn engenders the modern.

As a telltale sign of the primitive, acts of savagery are ever-present in the description of the performers of the floor show at Connie's Inn. The star-studded bill of the "Hot Chocolate" review included the rising young chanteuse Billie Holiday, Caribbean dancers Paul and Thelma Merres, Earl "Snake-Hips" Tucker (who, as one newspaper announced, "shakes like a man with a chill"), and a chorus line of "black and tan" beauties. In his reverie, Le Corbusier evokes the typical tropes of blackness — primitive, rhythmic, frenzied, abysmal, frightful, murderous, barbaric, and explosive — to characterize the performance. A similar eruption of primitivism infuses the passages about lindy hoppers at the Savoy Ballroom where "ordinary colored people join each other in very nearly savage rights." The ethereal environs of the dance hall — recall the flickering projection of clouds on the blue walls — enveloped Le Corbusier. With the architecture of the hall receding in the glow of the flickering projector, the kinetic twists and turns of the dancers apparently evoked memories of his journey to French colonial Africa. He remembered a similar phenomenon of the fierce eroding wind against the peaks of the Atlas Mountains, observed from the bird's-eye view of an airplane: a primeval scene of nature — eroding winds and "geological dramas," where one makes shelter against the "tumult" of the "unfathomable march of the elements." The dancing black bodies, elided with the eroded mountains, create a sublime drama in the rational disembodied eye of the architect.

Ironically, Le Corbusier finds in this very primitivism a rationality and regularity that counters the confusion and unpredictability of the chaotic industrialization of the 20th century. He aligns the art of the Negro with the art of the engineer: "The old rhythmic instinct of the virgin African forest has learned the lesson of the machine." These performing black bodies are machines: the rhythmic "tap-tap-rap-tap-tap" of dancers is "as mechanical as a sewing machine," and the jazz band's tempo is a "smoothly running turbine." Together they create a symphony of production: "The Negro orchestra is impeccable, flawless, regular, playing ceaselessly in an ascending rhythm: the trumpet is piercing, strident, screaming over the stamping of feet. It is the equivalent of a beautiful turbine running in the midst of human conversations. Hot jazz." Le Corbusier exalts and desires these black bodies; he finds flourishing in them a primal human spirit lacking in the modernized European. The cacophony of sound and energy emitted by these black bodies and/as pulsing machines are the base elements of a modern world over which, nevertheless, Euro-American and European men are masters. From the performances of the "machines/nature/black bodies," Le Corbusier composed his opus for modern society — the Radiant City.

This alluring yet threatening "blackness," however, is not confined to the dance halls and nightclubs; it pervades the space of the city where a "vast nocturnal festival . . . spreads out." The dark vertical shafts of the Daily News Building, Chrysler Building, McGraw-Hill Building, Rockefeller Center, and the Empire State Building puncture the shadowy corridors of the city grid. As

LE CORBUSIER SCANS GOTHAM'S TOWERS

The French Architect, on a Tour, Finds the City Violently Alive, a Wilderness of Experiment Toward a New Order



LE CORBUSIER SCANS GOTHAM'S TOWERS. The French Architect, on a Tour, Finds the City Violently Alive, a Wilderness of Experiment Toward a New Order. The city of New York is a wilderness of experiment toward a new order. The French architect, Le Corbusier, has just returned from a tour of the city. He has seen the skyscrapers, the bridges, the parks, the streets, the people. He has seen the city as it is, and he has seen the city as it should be. He has seen the city as a wilderness of experiment toward a new order.



LE CORBUSIER SCANS GOTHAM'S TOWERS. The French Architect, on a Tour, Finds the City Violently Alive, a Wilderness of Experiment Toward a New Order. The city of New York is a wilderness of experiment toward a new order. The French architect, Le Corbusier, has just returned from a tour of the city. He has seen the skyscrapers, the bridges, the parks, the streets, the people. He has seen the city as it is, and he has seen the city as it should be. He has seen the city as a wilderness of experiment toward a new order.

"Le Corbusier Scans Gotham's Towers" *New York Times Magazine*, 3 November 1935.

a sensibility jazz is everywhere, even in the skyscrapers of which one writer of the period, characterizing Raymond Hood's Radiator Building, notes: "Its Gothic-primitive fancifulness and innovative black-brick and gleaming gold-leaf coloration made one viewer think of 'jazz,' of 'tom-toms' and 'gleaming spear points.'"⁴ As with the black entertainers, Le Corbusier admires the raw performative energy of the skyscrapers, noting that "Manhattan is hot jazz in stone and steel." Both jazz and skyscrapers are events, gestures, bursts of activity; they are not for Le Corbusier a "deliberately conceived creation." Despite his fascination with the skyscrapers' energetic expression, Le Corbusier sees them as inefficient in their verticality, exclaiming in the **New York Times**: "They are too small!" Though he admires the masterful engineering of Manhattan's high-rises, Le Corbusier observes the streets of Manhattan clogged with automobile and pedestrian traffic, a proliferation of slums, and the migration of middle-class white populations to garden city suburbs – all of which erode the vitality of the city. The spirit of death cloaks the skyscrapers, connoted once again by blackness: "The black polished stones, the walls faced with dark gleaming slabs" surround the art deco edifice of the Empire State and overwhelms the city.

Blackness and darkness, a powerful elision, cast their pall everywhere. Le Corbusier detects an ominous darkness permeating through the cavernous winding streets of Manhattan, he hears it in the "roaring cadence" of Negro jazz, and beholds it in the shadowy columns of stone and steel. Despite this sense of impending demise, there are flickers of hope – if New Yorkers will adopt his plans, of course. To the European eyes of Le Corbusier, Manhattan is still in its infancy, a city merely 20 years old, born when its first skyscrapers arose in the first decade of the century. The brilliance of American capitalism pales, however, before the "timidity" and "puerility" that Le Corbusier observes pervading this fledgling America (**When the Cathedrals were**

White is subtitled "A Journey to the Country of Timid People"). This metaphorically "black" America awaits a cultural renaissance.

In contradistinction to America, Le Corbusier reminds his readers that France always already had skyscrapers: majestic gothic cathedrals, monuments to rational building techniques. France, according to Le Corbusier, teeters on the brink of a second renaissance in which French arts, music, and architecture, cultivated and refined over many centuries, will lead the vanguard in the salvation of Western culture. Most importantly, in this tumultuous period of rebirth, Le Corbusier's urban plan to erect a new metropolis, a Radiant City composed of crystalline "white" cathedrals of glass and steel, will rescue French cities from imminent destruction brought on by decades of poor planning and neglect.

IMAGINING WHITE CITIES

The new world was beginning white, limpid, joyous, clean, clear, and without hesitations, the new world was opening up like a flower among the ruins. They left behind them all recognized ways of doing things; they turned their backs on all that. In a hundred years the marvel was accomplished and Europe was changed.

The cathedrals were white.

—Le Corbusier, *When the Cathedrals Were White*

Crucial, then, to Le Corbusier's analysis of Manhattan is that this metaphoric "blackness" connotes a complex dialectical pair of both life and death. In his narrative, blackness registers upon the architecture of Manhattan and the

Negro body, with the former housing the workers of the modern metropolis and the latter fulfilling a requisite position in America's socioeconomic order as the laboring body. The work of these bodies not only produces capital but accords power to and frees from physical work those who assume the role of intellectual labor. This metaphysical distinction between mind and body, when underwriting a social hierarchy defined by racial categories, becomes a racial patriarchy.

In **Bordering on the Body**, literary theorist Laura Doyle explores how the thematics of racial patriarchy are reified by the science of race in the 19th and 20th centuries. A racial patriarchy is a social order that privileges and accords power to dominant racial groups who monopolize education and intellectual labor while leaving subordinate groups to carry out physical labor, and it is "an inherently metaphysical social formation – one that rests on the metaphysical distinction between a ruling head and a laboring body and then genders and racializes this distinction."⁵ How then is a racial-patriarchal social order that relies on the rift between physical and intellectual labor configured into the design of the Radiant City? And how do Le Corbusier's imaginings of blackness reflexively construct his radiant white city?

Following his reverie on the kinetic black bodies of Harlem and funereal cast of the Empire State building, Le Corbusier unveils his plans to transform Manhattan

into a Radiant City of pristine white skyscrapers. Significant in this sobering chapter, "Necessity of Communal Plans and Enterprises," is Le Corbusier's lament: "When the cathedrals were white, spirit was triumphant. But today the cathedrals of France are black and the spirit is bruised." He longs for the era of the glorious Gothic cathedrals in which the world was "white, limpid, joyous, clean, clear." It was an orderly society whose culture manifested "itself in fresh color, white linen and clean art." Whiteness metaphorically evokes purity and cleanliness. Throughout his narrative, lurking menacingly below the surface of this hygienic whiteness,

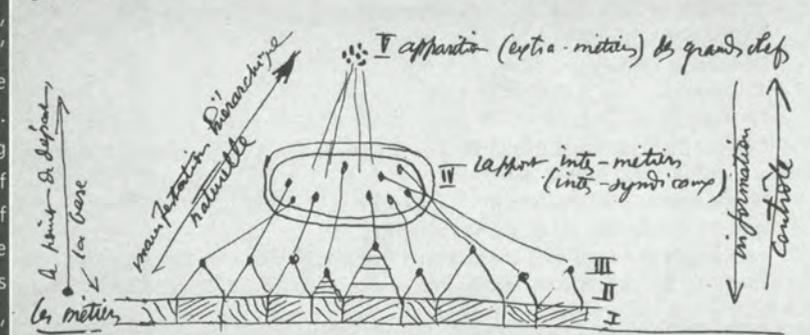
is blackness, reiterated as death, manifested as dirt, and potentially erupting in lawlessness; it is a threat that demands containment and control.

Blackness is configured not only as a threat but also as a site of desire. America's blacks and their musical innovation, jazz, become the locus of Le Corbusier's yearnings. "If architecture were at the point reached by jazz," he remarks, "it would be an incredible spectacle." Through "black" sensuality he can free himself from the chains of the past and conceive, reflexively, his new heroic city of white cathedrals. In **White Walls, Designer Dresses** Mark Wigley elucidates the sexual implications of Le Corbusier's remarks: "An architecture that releases the sensual potential of the machine age would, like jazz, contain the pre-machine past as well as the present, putting 'dynamism into the whole body' by putting people in touch with the irreducibly sensual origins of humanity."⁶

As a tourist, Le Corbusier peruses the socio-cultural spectrum of America and imagines through this metaphoric black culture precisely what his beloved France is not. From his journey he concludes that the society, preferably French, that transcends blackness will achieve the order and harmony necessary to erect the "bright whitewashed," "radiant filigreed white cathedrals" of his modern metropolis. The architecture of Le Corbusier's cathedrals will herald a new heroic period, one that echoes a mythic past in which "an international language reigned wherever the white race was, favoring the exchange of ideas and the transfer of culture."⁷

The plans for the Radiant City harbor the promise of an orderly society and city, transcending chaotic infrastructure and grime-laden edifices. To achieve

the eternal and fruitful struggle of creative effort versus academic sterility will be brought out.



The diagram above may therefore be taken to express the various trades of society, one beside the other, forming the great foundation of society's labor (I).

From the heart of each trade will rise the pyramid of natural hierarchies (II) (this may entail the most violent struggles; but the conflict will never exceed its proper

Le Corbusier, "Pyramid of Natural Hierarchies," *La Ville Radieuse*

this end Le Corbusier invents a meticulously functioning urban machine. Enamored by modern production theories such as Taylorism, Le Corbusier designs an urban standard, an **objet type**, based on an ideal set of criteria that allow a variety of possible iterations. As an ideal form, the elements can be modified when applied to a given topography – in this instance, New York City. The layout of the components of the Radiant City resembles a body: legs (warehouses, heavy industry, and factories), lungs/torso (housing, culture-opera, museums, hotels, embassies, the neck-rail, and air terminals), and head (business center). The entire city is crossed by network of arteries, highways, and railways. The productive forces of the economic base – warehouses and industries – are the legs that carry the load of the social body: housing, cultural amenities, business, commercial and government buildings. Urban density is achieved by building vertically, elevating each mass onto **pilotis**, thus freeing the ground from congestion and allowing extensive coverage of park space and recreational facilities. The plans include nurseries, kindergartens, and schools within each housing block so that mothers would be near their children. A worker would no longer waste valuable productive time traveling by train from garden suburb to his job in the city; in the Radiant City he could drive his automobile along the extensive network of highways to nearby offices or factories. To maximize exposure to sunlight and air – necessary components to sustain a natural order – the entire city is oriented on a “heliothermic axis” determined by local climatic conditions.

The city’s distribution of elements and functions also reflects what Le Corbusier labels in the **Radiant City** the “pyramid of natural hierarchies.” This pyramid is a sociopolitical order structured according to a resident’s occupation founded upon theories espoused by Syndicalism, a French labor movement to which Le Corbusier had affiliations in the 1930s.⁸ The Syndicalists, in brief, proposed the reorganization of French society and politics away from Republican ideals of citizenry and participatory government and toward industrial production administered by workers’ guilds or **métiers**. In this planned economy, at the bottom of the pyramidal order are workers’ groups organized into trades that form **métiers**; at the next level the leaders from these groups making up an interunion council that deliberate and resolve disputes between trades, as well as implement economic policy stabilizing production and distribution. At the top of this social order is the “extra **métier**,” the grand chiefs or the supreme authorities who would be “free from all problems stemming from technical insufficiencies. This group of intellectual elites is at liberty to concentrate on the country’s higher purposes.” The supreme authority – a body of men, not engaged in corporeal labor and entrusted with the future of Western civilization – would be housed in “Cartesian skyscrapers” positioned in a grid at the summit of the city. The behemoth steel and glass towers, maximizing exposure to light and air, would be a phenomenal feat of ingenuity created by the marriage of engineering and architecture. The Radiant City’s political order fits neatly into the schema of a racial patriarchy, since these men would possess the highest intellectual acuity, biologically predestined to be free from physical work. These Cartesian skyscrapers, translucent white cathedrals “at” and “as” the head of the Radiant City, project the gaze of the supreme authority, and ultimately the gaze of Le Corbusier, outward to survey the neatly ordered city of light, sun, space, and trees.

PARIS NOIR

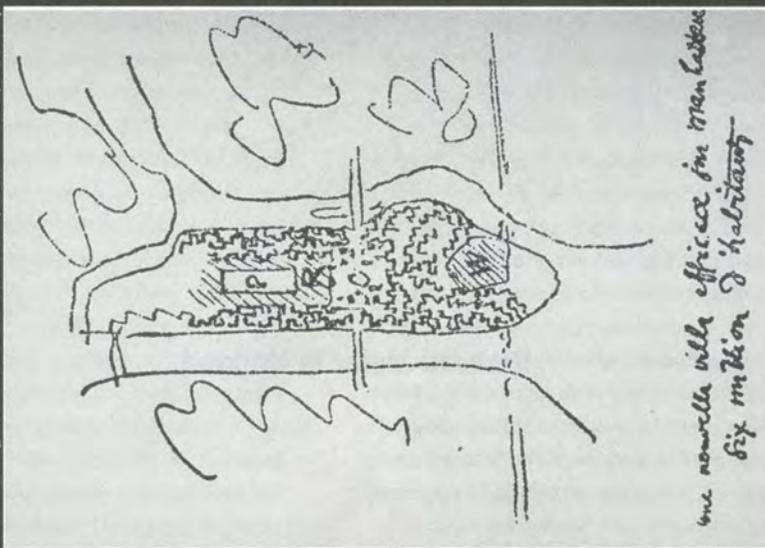
Josephine Baker herself is responsible for a preface to Paul Colin’s album . . . “I’ll say Paris is getting darker and darker in pairs. In a little while it shall be so dark until one shall light a match then another to see if the first is still lit.”

It is indeed, as Josephine says getting darker in Paris, if by darker one means that the Americanization of the “Ville Lumière” is making irresistible progress.

—B. J. Kospoth, “Paul Colin’s ‘Black Tumult,’” *The Paris Tribune*, 20 January 1929

American performer Josephine Baker arrived in Paris in 1925 and became an instant sensation. Her African-influenced jazz choreography and costumes drew immediate praise from French audiences already entranced by African iconography and imagery popularized by cubism and surrealism. Baker shrewdly pandered to French fantasies. But Baker was not the only transplanted black performer, saxophonist Sidney Bechet was an earlier expatriate, followed by a host of performers including Noble Sissle, Alberta Hunter, and Doc Cheatum. Louis Armstrong came to Paris in 1933 and stayed for almost two years, returning New York City in the fall of 1935. These entertainers joined the cadre of American bohemians, Ernest Hemingway and Gertrude Stein, among others, transforming Paris’s already resplendent café society to the epicenter of “le jazz hot.” In the end, as Josephine Baker quips – Paris the radiant “Ville Lumière” – was getting darker.

Through the extension of French colonialism, a capitalist enterprise, not only were French influences affecting the colonies but reciprocally the colonies influenced France. The flow of goods and culture from the former colonies, including the United States, brought large numbers of peoples from the African diaspora to Paris. Prior to Le Corbusier’s trip to Harlem, Harlem’s culture and peoples were already in Paris. Thus Le Corbusier’s lament that “the cathedrals belong to other people – to the dead. . . . Everything is blackened with soot and eaten away by wear and tear: institutions, education, cities, farms, our lives, our hearts, our thoughts” points obliquely to the racial transformation of Paris. To sort out this disordered society, his Radiant City would be ideally



Le Corbusier, “The New Efficient City for Manhattan’s Six Million Inhabitants,” *La Ville Radiouse*, 1933

1 A few noteworthy books that chronicle this rich moment in African-American history are James Weldon Johnson’s *Black Manhattan* (New York: De Capo Press, 1991); David Levering Lewis’s *When Harlem Was in Vogue* (New York: Knopf, 1981); and Stephen Watson’s *The Harlem Renaissance: Hub of African-American Culture, 1920–30* (New York: Pantheon, 1995).

2 David Stowe, *Swing Changes: Big Band Jazz in New Deal America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 211.

3 *Ibid.*, 4.

4 Ann Douglas, *Terrible Honesty: Mongrel Manhattan in the 1920s*, (New York: Noonday Press, 1995), 450.

5 Laura Doyle, *Bordering on the Body* (New York: Oxford University Press 1994), 20.

6 Mark Wigley, *White Walls, Designer Dresses: The Fashioning of Modern Architecture* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996), 294.

7 Le Corbusier, *When the Cathedrals Were White*, Francis Hyslop, Jr., trans. (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1947), 3–4.

8 See Mary McLeod, *Urbanism and Utopia: Le Corbusier From Regional Syndicalism to Vichy* (Michigan: UMI, 1985).

situated within what he terms “natural regions” that possess “permanent elements that dominate the machine-age adventure: climate, topography, geography, race.” Le Corbusier’s desired Radiant City was predicated upon physical topographic boundaries underwritten by racial difference. In the end, his utopian vision was a ruse – those scripted boundaries, even for his beloved Paris, had already been transgressed by bodies swinging to the sounds of hot jazz.