LE CORBUSIER IN HARLEM

BLACK BODIES WHITE CITIES

MABEL O. WILSON

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 form. Jazz evolved from the remnants of African rhythms, slave folk songs, and blues tunes. Techniques of jazz performance and ideas on sexuality, race, and gender previously contained by traditional conventions of propriety.

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—inhertently a color-blind medium—jazz’s popularity grew. By mid-decade, Harlem was home to writers-only institutions such as the famous Cotton Club, a multi-ethnic 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 Charleston, and cultivate other sociocultural representations had to negotiate these tenacious racial stereotypes.

The new jazz sound—particularly its smoother embodiment in Louis Armstrong’s “swinging” sound—was accompanied by a dance that drew upon its rhythm: the lindy hop. As a social dance the Lindy’s moves were low-slung 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. 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 bewitched and delighted both Harlemites and upper-class whites who packed the dance floors seven nights a week. The ballroom itself was a beehive 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 walls behind [the bandstands] 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.” The ethereal atmosphere, the carnivalesque 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—were often turned away by performance rituals. The ethereal atmosphere, the carnivalesque Savoy, epitomized “mongrel Manhattan.”
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 Africentric presence in architecture, notated 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 inspired directly from Africa where there are still tom-toms, mases, 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 brutality and agony could call forth such cries, such noises.

—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 embedded in its venal skyscrapers and materialism) against European'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 stop-over fashion, after adventurous 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 disdain of what he terms a young fledgling society (its youth embedded in its venal skyscrapers and materialism) against European's venerable cathedrals) appear in his book, *When the Cathedrals Were White*, published in 1936.

**Le Corbusier Scans Gotham's Towers**

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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 ‘tomp’-toms’ and ‘gleaming spear points.’” 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, 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 metaphysics of racial patriarchy are embodied 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 gender- and racializes this distinction.” How then is a racial patriarchy a social order that relies on the rift between physical and intellectual labor configured into the design of the Radiant City? And how does Le Corbusier’s imaginations 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 moves his plans to transform Manhattan into a Radiant City of pristine white skyscrapers. Significant in this opening 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 New York. How then are the Gothic cathedrals of which the world was “white, limpid, joyous, clear.” It was an ordered society whose culture manifested itself in fresh color, while in the society Pan 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, he looms the “area of 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.

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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—this is now, for instance, New York City. The layout of the components of the Radiant City resembles a body: legs (warehouses, heavy industry, and factories), lungs (housing, culture, opera, museums, hotels, embassies, the neck-rail, and air terminals), and head (business center). The entire city is cross-connected by network of rail yards, highways, and rail stations. 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 "heliotropic axis" determined by local climatic conditions.

The city’s distribution of elements and functions also reflects what Le Corbusier labels as the "pyramidal order." In the Radiant City, the "pyramidal order" is composed 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.

The Syndicalists, in brief, proposed the reorganization of French society and politics away from Republican ideals of citizenship 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 top are "extra métiers," 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 at a grid at the summit of the city. The bohemian 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 predisposed to be free from physical work. These Cartesian skyscrapers, transcendent while cathedrals "are" and "be" the heart of the Radiant City, project the gaze of the supreme authority and ultimately the space of Le Corbusier, outward to survey the nearly ordered city of light, sun, space, and trees.

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 steadfastly parodied to French fantasies. But Baker was not the only transplant—black performer, saxophonist Sidney Bechet was an earlier expatriate, followed by a host of performers including Noble Sissle, Alberta Hunter, and Doc Cheatham. Louis Armstrong came to Paris in 1928 and stayed for almost two years, returning New York City in the fall of 1929. 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 is 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 were influencing France. The flow of goods and culture from the former colonies, including the United States, brought large numbers of people 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—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 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 race—these scripted boundaries, even for his beloved Paris, had already been transgressed by bodies swelling to the sounds of hot jazz.