Publishing Blackness

Young, John, Hutchinson, George

Published by University of Michigan Press

Young, John and George Hutchinson.
Publishing Blackness: Textual Constructions of Race Since 1850.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/21936

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=780083
George Bornstein

THE COLORS OF MODERNISM

Publishing African Americans, Jews, and Irish in the 1920s

On 5 November 1939, shortly after the outbreak of World War II, Paul Robeson performed as lead baritone in the CBS radio performance of the eleven-minute cantata “Ballad for Americans,” which caused the widest public reaction to a program since Orson Welles’s sensational The War of the Worlds a year earlier. Unabashedly inclusionist in what the African American paper New York Amsterdam News called “white and colored voices, so mixed for the occasion,” Robeson’s strong baritone voice responded to the question “Am I an American?” with a resounding affirmation beginning “I’m just an Irish, Negro, Jewish . . .” and went on to list a variety of ethnicities and religions. The song received a twenty-minute standing ovation, with callers then jamming the CBS switchboard for two hours more. Its popularity cut across ethnic and political lines and led to performances at the nominating conventions in 1940 of both the Republican and the Communist parties, surely a unique occurrence. In giving African Americans, Jews, and Irish pride of place in a list that stressed common linkages more than very real tensions, Robeson was typical rather than exceptional, and particularly so for African Americans of the time. As late as 1965, the Black poet Melvin Tolson had the narrator of his masterpiece Harlem Gallery describe his ancestry as “Afroirishjewish” in a book published by Twayne, a Jewish firm founded by Jacob Steinberg in 1948. That volume carried an introduction by the Jewish poet Karl Shapiro championing Tolson as a great poet almost unknown because of his race and little represented in anthologies, a situation that Shapiro had experienced starting out as a Jewish writer in the 1930s. Indeed, Shapiro himself had already linked treatment of African Americans and Jews in poems like “University” with its famous beginning, “To hurt the Negro and avoid the Jew / Is the curriculum.” My own recent book The Colors of Zion: Blacks, Jews, and Irish from 1845
to 1945 aims to recover a range of lost connections among those three groups in a variety of areas (races, melting pots, nationalisms, popular culture, and especially the 1930s) and so to query our current categories of separation.

Here I want to use “bibliographic codes”—the material features of the text, and particularly today those signifying particular publishers—to illuminate some of those lost linkages among minority groups, particularly African Americans, Jews, and Irish, and to refigure both their relation to what we used to call Anglo-American “modernism” and the nature of that “modernism” itself. I will argue that current editions of minority writers that obscure their original publishers also obscure the original social placement and reception of the texts, and that recovering those early bibliographic contexts exemplifies the relevance of book history and “social text” editing to literary interpretation. We often miss such possibilities either by neglecting publishers altogether or mistaking currently major firms for established ones a century ago. But back then publishers like Boni and Liveright, Knopf, Simon and Schuster, Viking, or Random House were new marginal upstarts largely unable to sign mainstream Anglo-Saxon writers. Instead, they succeeded by acquiring newcomers like themselves, particularly African American, Jewish, Irish, or other avant-garde modernist ones. Further, such firms were founded and largely staffed by Jewish editors who had bumped into glass ceilings at mainline houses and who created new networks in promoting work by different ethnic groups.

Before 1890 American publishing centered on the Northeast, particularly Boston, with family firms like Houghton Mifflin and Little, Brown holding sway. By 1900 and especially with the outbreak of World War I, the publishing industry’s center of gravity shifted to New York. Even so, old-line WASP houses continued to dominate and to publish primarily white, Anglo-Saxon Protestant authors. Literature by emerging groups, like that of Anglo-Saxon but avant-garde modernists or recent Europeans, usually had to seek out the newer, more marginal Jewish firms to reach a market at all. It took consistent pressure from William Dean Howells for the most famous Jewish writer of the previous generation, Abraham Cahan, to break through into publication in English, first with *Yekl: A Tale of New York* at Appleton and then with *The Rise of David Levinsky* at Harper.

Earlier, the editor of *Harper’s Weekly* had returned the manuscript of *Yekl* by observing tartly, “The life of an East-Side Jew wouldn’t interest an
American reader.” The editor’s distinction between true Americans and members of ethnic or racial groups bedeviled minority authors before and since. Publishing historian Charles A. Madison observes that at the time “gentlemen publishers . . . would not employ a Jew and made little or no effort to seek out Jewish writers.”3 Alfred Harcourt of Harcourt, Brace—one of the few gentle publishers to promote ethnic literature, especially African Americans—captured the situation well in a retrospective look from 1937. Citing the “flood of European immigrants” to the United States beginning in the late nineteenth century, Harcourt observed, “While Boston publishers were bringing out sets of Longfellow and Emerson, in new bindings, new publishers sprang up in New York, notably Huebsch, Knopf, and Liveright, who began to publish translations of contemporary foreign authors and books by young American authors who had broken away from the Victorian point of view.”4 If they weren’t Irish, Black, or Jewish, those “young American authors” usually at least belonged to the avant-garde. Understanding their publishing networks creates new angles to see the literature of different groups as sharing in the larger modernist enterprise and, conversely, displays modernism as a more varied venture than earlier views often suggest. That means more than merely adding new authors and material, as important as that has been. Such addition also dictates what T. S. Eliot famously described in his essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent” (1919) as altering the whole previous ordering. It means rethinking both the works themselves and their interrelationships.

B. W. Huebsch, the son of a rabbi, could legitimately claim to be the first of the new publishers, beginning in the first decade of the twentieth century rather than the second or third as did the others. His small firm published an extraordinary number of valuable books, including work by European authors like Maxim Gorki’s The Spy, Gerhardt Hauptmann’s The Weavers, and August Rodin’s Venus, and further afield even Mahatma Gandhi’s Young India. Part of the Irish-inflected group that met at Petipas’s restaurant in New York and featured John Butler Yeats (the poet’s father) and Mary and Padraic Colum, Huebsch scored his greatest coup in becoming James Joyce’s American publisher for his early works. That included the first American edition of the Dubliners stories as well as the first edition anywhere of Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, both in 1916. He also published modernists like Sherwood Anderson and D. H. Lawrence. No wonder his contemporary Christopher Morley joked in the Saturday Review that “it used to be waggishly said that any Irish,
Hindu, or German artist could find a home in Mr. Huebsch’s list when no other publisher would take a chance on him.”

Huebsch placed a high value on international cross-fertilization. Correlating a rise in European books with American imprints like his own with the wave of new immigration, he praised the “interchange of literatures and of the cultures they represent” in a way that anticipates conclusions of hybridity theorists of our own day like Cornel West and Anthony Appiah. West, for example, argues that “from the very beginning we must call into question any notions of pure traditions or pristine heritages. . . . Ambiguous legacies, hybrid cultures. By hybrid, of course, we mean cross-cultural fertilization.” Huebsch staked out a similar position earlier in the twentieth century: “The land that depends solely on indigenous writing has no standing in the large world of culture; the great books all come from lands that have ever drawn on foreign sources,” he wrote. “Every language owes a debt to every other.” For Huebsch, payment of the debt to hybridity involved featuring rather than concealing his own Jewishness, as West would do later with his blackness. Huebsch adopted as his press mark the seven-branched Jewish candelabra known like the nine-branched one of Hanukah as a menorah and described in Exodus 31–32. It is depicted on the frieze adorning the Arch of Titus in Rome commemorating destruction of the Jewish kingdom and temple in Jerusalem in AD 70. In a gesture that surely would have pleased the philosemitic Joyce, Huebsch used it on the title pages of works like Joyce’s own Exiles when he published it in 1918.

Huebsch did not publish much work by African American authors through his own firm, but that changed when he joined the newly founded Viking Press in 1925 as vice-president, bringing his backlist with him. Unlike Huebsch but like many of their contemporaries in publishing, Viking’s founders Harold Guinzburg and George Oppenheimer enjoyed college educations, Guinzberg at Harvard and Oppenheimer at Williams. In their very first year, Viking brought out James Weldon Johnson and Rosamond Johnson’s The Book of American Negro Spirituals with splashy fanfare and followed it up with The Second Book of Negro Spirituals the next year, followed in turn by God’s Trombones and the autobiographical Along this Way among other works. Viking published other high-profile African American books as well, including Richard Wright’s Twelve Million Black Voices in the 1930s and W. E. B. Du Bois’s The World and Africa in the 1940s. Viking’s Irish authors included James Joyce (whom Huebsch brought with him upon joining) and Sean
O’Faolain; their Jewish ones, Muriel Rukeyser, Dorothy Parker, and Lillian Hellman; and their other modernists numbered Joyce, Lawrence, and Anderson from Huebsch’s list along with John Steinbeck and the muckraking Upton Sinclair. Foreign additions included Franz Werfel and Stefan Zweig.

The pattern of publishing African American, Irish, and Jewish authors along with translations of foreign ones started by Huebsch at his own press and then at Viking continued in the rising house of Alfred A. Knopf, operated by Knopf together with his wife Blanche from 1915 onward. Knopf began chiefly with foreign authors, including Russians like Gogol and Turgenev. He also published the Irish writer Liam O’Flaherty’s novel of betrayal during the Irish “Troubles,” The Informer, along with modernist volumes like T. S. Eliot’s Poems and The Sacred Wood (both 1920), Ezra Pound’s Lustra and Pavannes and Divisions, all the major poetry of Wallace Stevens from Harmonium in 1923 onward, and after Huebsch migrated to Viking several D. H. Lawrence books. His Jewish titles included the first two plays of Lillian Hellman and Siegfried Sassoon’s Prehistoric Burials. Those works all create interesting contexts for reading the major African American books that Knopf promoted, including both of Nella Larsen’s novels, Quicksand and Passing, and particularly Langston Hughes’s poetry from The Weary Blues in 1926 onward and important prose volumes like his autobiographical The Big Sea too.

The Weary Blues made Hughes one of the first African American poets to be published by a major (or about to be major) firm in the United States. Despite occasional later tensions, especially during the 1930s when Blanche worried that Hughes’s work was becoming too politically propagandistic, the ties between him and them remained tight. In 1941 Hughes wrote to them, “Dear Alfred and Blanche, This June marks for me twenty years of publication—largely thanks to you as my publishers. With my continued gratitude and affection . . . Langston Hughes.”66

Nor did the Knopfs shy away from controversy: they issued both Walter White’s The Fire and the Flint about the Atlanta race riots, which other houses had rejected because of subject, and Carl Van Vechten’s Nigger Heaven, touchy because of its title and its white authorship despite Van Vechten’s close and admiring relationship to Harlem culture. Publishers like the Knopfs did not operate in isolation, of course, but as part of a network of connections and acquaintances which sometimes blossomed into friendships. In his memoir The Big Sea, itself published by Knopf, Langston Hughes has left a vivid portrait of attending a triple birthday.
For several pleasant years, [Van Vechten] gave an annual birthday party for James Weldon Johnson, Young Alfred A. Knopf, Jr. and himself, for their birthdays fell on the same day. At the last of these parties, the year before Mr. Johnson died, on the Van Vechten table were three cakes, one red, one white, and one blue—the colors of our flag. They honored a Gentile, a Negro, and a Jew. But the differences of race did not occur to me until days later, when I thought back about the three colors and the three men. Carl Van Vechten is like that party. He never talks grandiloquently about democracy or Americanism. Nor makes a fetish of those qualities. But he lives them with sincerity—and humor.\(^7\)

Hughes might have said the same thing about his own publisher Alfred Knopf’s list, which displayed the same democratic qualities allied to an aristocracy of merit wherever it surfaced. Knopf’s Borzoi book imprint materialized that credo in the books themselves, providing the same high-quality craftsmanship to every book regardless of the race, creed, or color of its author. They set a new standard for the industry.

The strength of such networks extended even to the one gentile house that published numerous black titles—Harcourt, Brace—through its Jewish vice president Joel Spingarn, first Knopf’s favorite professor at Columbia and later his friend. While teaching comparative literature at Columbia for twelve years before his own dismissal in 1911 for introducing a resolution of support for a colleague who had himself been dismissed, Spingarn also instructed Alfred Harcourt and Donald Brace. Harcourt and Brace both worked at Henry Holt & Co. until the restrictive policies there propelled them to resign and found their own firm, taking such upcoming authors as Sinclair Lewis with them. They promptly recruited their former teacher Spingarn first as literary adviser and then as vice president and partner. By that time Spingarn had thrown himself into biracial social activism and become first cofounder and then chairman of the board of the NAACP, where he allied himself closely with W. E. B. Du Bois. He put his comparative literature background to use at Harcourt, Brace by directing their European Library series, and his civil rights experience by recruiting African American writers. Under his guidance Harcourt, Brace promptly published Du Bois’s prose *Dark Shadows* in
1920, and in 1922 Claude McKay’s first book of poems in the United States, *Harlem Shadows*, and James Weldon Johnson’s *Book of American Negro Poetry*, along with work by Arna Bontemps, Sterling Brown, and other African Americans. They also published Carl Sandburg’s *The Chicago Race Riots, July 1919*, Louis Untermeyer’s influential anthology *Modern American Poetry*, and Sinclair Lewis’s *Main Street*, while the European Library imprint featured work by the Frenchman Remy de Gourmont, the Italian Benedetto Croce, and the German Heinrich Mann. The book that made the firm’s early reputation and finances, John Maynard Keynes’s *Economic Consequences of the Peace*, opened important links to the Bloomsbury modernists in England, including E. M. Forster and Virginia Woolf along with their sometime fellow-traveler T. S. Eliot.

In 1917 the Harvard-educated Boni brothers came together with the flashy self-made product of the jazz age Horace Liveright to create Boni and Liveright, another upstart Jewish firm that would publish work by various ethnic groups along with modernist Anglophone and European writers of any ethnicity. For their first dozen titles they built upon the unexpected success of the Bonis’ Little Leather Library, which had begun with minivolumes of Shakespeare stuffed into Whitman’s candy boxes. The resultant and still-influential Modern Library series featured cheap reprints of Friedrich Nietzsche, Oscar Wilde, Fyodor Dostoevsky, and others at sixty cents a volume. They soon moved into more contemporary work as well, publishing the first books by the black writers Jean Toomer (who disliked being termed a “Negro” or any other racial marker), the West Indian Eric Walrond, and the novelist Jessie Fauset. Irish authors included Liam O’Flaherty, George Bernard Shaw, and W. B. Yeats, along with Irish Americans like Eugene O’Neill. Their Jewish writers numbered Dorothy Parker, Waldo Frank, Ben Hecht, and Mike Gold, reflecting a general left-liberal tilt. The firm even boasted perhaps the most distinguished assistant in New York publishing, the young Lillian Hellman. Other major modernist work included Hart Crane’s *White Buildings* and *The Bridge*, William Faulkner’s first two novels *Soldier’s Pay* and *Mosquitoes*, Ernest Hemingway’s *In Our Time*, and several works by Ezra Pound and Theodore Dreiser. Liveright also secured Pound’s services as translator by agreeing to one of the most unusual clauses in publishing history, devised by Pound himself: “Mr. Liveright agrees not to demand Mr. Pound’s signature on the translation of any work that Mr. Pound considers a disgrace to humanity or too imbecile to be borne.” The Jewish character of the firm did not trouble the increasingly anti-
Semitic Pound, who consistently valued Liveright’s openness to modernist literature and recommended him to his friends, in 1920 even calling Liveright “a pearl among publishers.” But it did bother William Faulkner, who like many people of his time associated Jews with Blacks. He therefore was happy to switch to Harcourt, Brace after two books with Boni and Liveright. “I’m going to be published by white folks now,” he told his great-aunt Alabama Falkner McLean. “Harcourt Brace & Co. bought me from Liveright. Much nicer there.” T. S. Eliot expressed himself with even more vitriol about a slight delay in royalty payments. “I am sick of doing business with Jew publishers who will not carry out their part of the contract unless they are forced to,” he told his American patron and fellow anti-Semite John Quinn. “I wish I could find a decent Christian publisher in New York.” Ironically, Liveright continued to publish modernist work even though it often sold poorly. “Do you suppose I like to go on losing money on you miserable highbrows?” he twitted Pound at about the same time as Eliot’s letter. “But no matter what you write, you know I always want to publish your poetry and I know that I do and will do more for it than anyone else.”

The partnership of the Bonis and Liveright proved unstable: the brothers had operated a Greenwich Village bookshop that sponsored the avant-garde journal *The Glebe*, from whose sheets they had issued the breakthrough verse anthology *Des Imagistes* in 1914. In contrast, the brasher Liveright cut his teeth on Wall Street. Backed by money from his father-in-law, he had an up-and-down career there before leaving with a tidy pile made in bond trading. Ever the spendthrift, he began in 1924 to use money from the publishing house to support his growing involvement in Broadway productions, where he scored his greatest hit with the production of *Dracula* starring Bela Lugosi. Not surprisingly, by the mid-1920s the Bonis had left to found their own firm, A. and C. Boni, which published the signature anthology of the Harlem Renaissance, Alain Locke’s *The New Negro*, among other works. Another influential refugee from the firm was Bennett Cerf, who served as vice president for two years before leaving in 1925 to found Random House, buying the Modern Library series to take with him.

Its iconic status makes *The New Negro* a particularly useful example of the importance of textual and bibliographic awareness to minority literature. Although our contemporary paperback editions present themselves as reprints, they display editorial interventions that alter the meaning of the work and, indeed, do not even include all of the origi-
nal 1925 volume. The alterations to bibliographic codes loom larger here than those to linguistic ones. True, modern title pages label the work simply “The New Negro” rather than the more elastic “The New Negro: An Interpretation” of the original, which suggests one point of view among many. But even more important, modern paperbacks omit a key element of the title page, the bold statement “Book Decoration and Portraits by Winold Reiss,” which gives the seventeen color illustrations by Reiss nearly coequal status with the verbal contents of the book. Reiss was a white artist born in Germany who emigrated to the United States, where he mentored among others Aaron Douglas, perhaps the most famous visual artist of the Harlem Renaissance. The original title page, then, proclaims the volume a biracial enterprise from the start, though of course with the African American editor Alain Locke playing the larger role. That signal also reminds us of the biracial nature of the contributors to the project, which included the white Albert Barnes, Paul Kellogg, and Melville Herskovits along with a host of African Americans from different generations. Finally, the imprint of Albert and Charles Boni reminds us of the marginality of the venue, a new Jewish publishing house in New York rather than a mainstream WASP one from New England.

The Bonis’ heavy promotion of *The New Negro* exemplified another trait of the firm, its pioneering exploitation of modern commercial techniques for publicizing its products and, indeed, thinking of them as products. This resulted partly from the brief but important stint as early publicity director for the predecessor firm of Edward Bernays, nephew of Sigmund Freud (he recruited his famous uncle to the Boni and Liveright imprint) and devotee of modern advertising who had worked with the U.S. Committee on Public Information during World War I. He declared in *Publisher’s Weekly* his devotion to supplementing traditional advertising with “propaganda and publicity, which proved such a powerful factor in the war.” *The New Negro* grew of course, out of the *Survey Graphic* special issue “Harlem: Mecca of the New Negro,” which in turn grew out of the famous Civic Club dinner that did so much to crystallize the New Negro movement and volume. That dinner had been organized ostensibly to promote publication of Jessie Fauset’s 1924 novel *There Is Confusion*, an event marking a breakthrough into major promotion for a work by an African American author. Floyd Calvin, the young and talented new managing editor for the Eastern region of the important African American newspaper *The Pittsburgh Courier*, saw that importance at once. He declared in a column:
Boni & Liveright, the publishers, purchased liberal space in the notable publications, and their advertisement, which was complimentary in every detail, reads as follows . . . We make mention of this because it marks the beginning of a new era in the treatment of colored writers. Heretofore they have received no such encouragement when their work was accepted for publication and but scant notice when it appeared . . . it is heartening to see this new attitude. We trust the reception of Miss Fauset’s book will make the way even easier for other literary aspirants who choose to follow.\footnote{10}

The groundbreaking publicity campaigns of Boni and Liveright, along with other new publishers, for minority literature represented both a desire to procure it a wider audience and a commitment to helping to create that audience. That applied to Irish, Jewish, and other modernist writers along with its African American ones.

Four books influential in different ways published by Boni and Liveright before the Boni brothers left exemplify the original firm’s ethnic range and create a new context for viewing cultural works often kept apart from one another. Earliest came *Irish Fairy and Folk Tales*, edited by W. B. Yeats and one of the first titles in The Modern Library Series. Originally published in London at the start of the Celtic Twilight movement, the volume helped to inject ideas of folkloric and mythic structure and content into the Irish Renaissance and modernism in general. Its numerous subdivisions included separate groupings on fairies, ghosts, paradises, giants, and others. The Irish tales also carried a nationalist and ethnic edge, recovering or perhaps creating a neglected tradition, as books of stories by various racial groups or by women do in our own time. By this time Macmillan had become Yeats’s main publisher for his own work, and he took increasing control over the physical appearance of his books with them, including design and covers. That was not the case with Modern Library, but the weakness of copyright protection for foreign work even after passage of the Chace Act in 1891 and the flat-tery of inclusion in the ranks of recognized ancient and modern masters proved attractive. So, too, did the additional if small fee and the outreach to American audiences. Yeats went on to publish two more books with Boni and Liveright. Next came a reprint for the Modern Library of his one-volume selection, *The Poems of William Blake*, originally published in London in 1893. Part of Yeats’s lifelong devotion to his early roman-
tic precursor, the book sported an introduction in which Yeats began by claiming an improbable Irish ancestry for Blake. The Celtic theme continued in Yeats’s final volume for Boni and Liveright, where he contributed a preface to Arland Ussher’s translation of Brian Merriman’s late eighteenth-century Gaelic poem *The Midnight Court*. An exuberant satire against growing sexual repression in Catholic Ireland, the poem completed the trilogy of Irish (or in the case of Blake, pseudo-Irish) materials that marked all three of Yeats’s contributions to the firm’s growing list.

Yeats’s *Irish Fairy and Folk Tales* was followed by the Jewish author and critic Waldo Frank’s *Our America* (1919), which passionately argued for creation of “a new historical and spiritual consciousness” in revolt against “the academies and institutions which would whittle America down to a few stale realities current fifty years ago when our land in all but the political surface of its life was yet a colony of Britain”! Inclined more toward pluralist conceptions like those of Horace Kallen, Frank saw a welter of new cultures contributing towards an American renaissance that ranged from indigenous Native Americans to immigrant Jews. He devoted an entire chapter to the latter group, arguing that they had fallen into the wasteland of contemporary American materialism but showed signs of rising up again artistically and spiritually, and most of another chapter to Mexicans and Native Americans. And polyglot New York fascinated Frank, particularly its mix of European ethnic groups including Jews and Celts. Frank also saw clearly the role of firms like Boni and Liveright in dispensing minority and dissident literature, and in creating audiences for it. He made that plain repeatedly, as in his chapter on Horace Liveright in the book *Time Exposures*, also published by that firm. In the chapter entitled “One Hundred Per Cent American” Franks satirized the Ku Klux Klan, Security Leagues, and Vice Society by having them denounce Liveright in these terms: “He has sponsored half the advanced novelists who pollute our homes, half the radical thinkers who defile our customs, half the free verse poets who corrupt our English. He has defiantly come out for minorities in a land where the Majority is sacred. He has fought such noble democratic measures as Censorship, as Clean Book Bills—and with his own money!”

Frank particularly admired the rise of an African American culture in New York and took the manuscript of the first major novel of the Harlem Renaissance, Jean Toomer’s *Cane*, to his own publisher Horace Liveright. He not only persuaded Liveright to issue a contract but telegraphed the news to Toomer and then wrote a foreword for the first edition.
he praised “the book’s chaos of verse, tale, drama, its rhythmic rolling shift from lyricism to narrative” in a way that implicitly aligned it with other modernist work. *Cane* too deployed jumps between discrete units, shifting forms, a mix of elevated and everyday language, and a sense of mythic presences behind everyday occurrences. But Liveright’s effort to promote Toomer as a “Negro” writer ran into opposition from Toomer himself. The light-skinned Toomer resisted simplistic racial categorization and insisted on his own mixed origins. “Racially, I seem to have (who knows for sure) seven blood mixtures: French, Dutch, Welsh, Negro, German, Jewish, and Indian,” he wrote in a 1922 letter to the *Liberator* magazine. “Because of these, my position in America has been a curious one.” For Toomer, the categories used in the America of his day created false divisions among human beings. In a preface to an unpublished autobiography Toomer argued that “If I have to say ‘colored,’ ‘white,’ ‘jew,’ ‘gentile,’ and so forth, I will unwittingly do my bit toward reinforcing the limited views of mankind which dismember mankind into mutually repellant factions.” Accordingly, Toomer refused to identify himself as a “Negro” for Liveright, telling him, “I must insist that you never use such a word, such a thought again.”

Those works throw an unexpected crosslight on the fourth example, that famous modernist poem *The Waste Land* (1922) by T. S. Eliot, who had previously published in America with Alfred Knopf and like Faulkner would later escape to the more ethnically satisfactory Harcourt, Brace (despite the presence of Joel Spingarn there). Before Harcourt, Brace, the American editions of Eliot’s major early books came from Jewish publishers, the only ones who would touch them. The list with Knopf began with the pamphlet *Ezra Pound: His Metric and Poetry*, published along with Pound’s own *Lustra* in 1917. Next came *Poems* (1920), incorporating both the *Ara Vos Prec* and *Prufrock and Other Observations* volumes from England, and then the prose of *The Sacred Wood*. Unable to reach satisfactory terms with Knopf for *The Waste Land*, Eliot switched to Liveright, whom Pound had recommended. That poem’s presence in the Boni and Liveright list recontextualizes it in terms of African American, Jewish, and Irish modernist work and reveals its affinities with all three groupings. And Liveright’s worry that *The Waste Land* was too short for a separate book led to Eliot’s composition of the famous prose notes. Often seen as a pure product of WASP high culture, *The Waste Land* in the context of book history instead discloses its sometimes lost connections to other ethnic literatures and to popular cultures in general, as
Eliot scholarship has increasingly recognized. Indeed, its very title page proclaims its debt to modern Jewish publishing even as Eliot himself deprecated that group.

The poem’s (and the manuscript’s) invocations of black and Irish culture match its material presence among such works in the Boni and Liveright lists in both specific allusions and in overall structure and rhythm. In his essay “Hidden Name and Complex Fate” Ralph Ellison confessed that the poem “seized my mind” because of that fusion. “Somehow its rhythms were even closer to those of jazz than were those of the Negro poets, and even though I could not understand then, its range of allusion was as mixed and varied as that of Louis Armstrong” (160). Besides its rhythms, the poem reframed specific jazz and popular song works, such as “The Shakespearian Rag” for lines 128–30, in the middle of the “Game of Chess” section. That popular song from the 1912 Ziegfeld Follies provided the phrases “That Shakespearian rag, Most intelligent, very elegant” cited by Eliot.14 They not only allude to a past song but also describe Eliot’s own poem, and particularly its bringing together of what we often too simply dichotomize as high culture (here, Shakespeare, once himself part of the popular culture of his day) and popular jazz or ragtime. Such divisions are not mere illusion, but neither can they claim an absolute status, as Ellison’s comparison of T. S. Eliot’s rhythms to those of Louis Armstrong reminds us.

The confluence of Black, Irish, and Jewish elements with high culture loomed even larger in the original opening section of The Waste Land, which Eliot deleted at Pound’s instigation and which featured a Boston Irish pub crawl in which one character sings lines from George M. Cohan’s song “Harrigan”: “I’m proud of all the Irish blood that’s in me, / There’s not a man can say a word agin me.”15 The same section also invokes lines from two more popular songs—Thomas Allen’s 1904 “The Watermelon Vine” (also known as “Lindy Lou”) and Mae Sloan’s 1901 “My Evaline”—before citing with slight alteration lines from “The Cubanola Glide” by the Irish-Jewish songwriting team of Vincent Bryan (words) and Harry von Tilzer (music): “Tease, squeeze, lovin’ and wooin’ / Oh, babe, what are you doin’?” All three belonged to the genre then known as “coon songs,” which despite the racist sound of the term could vary from crude stereotypes to more sophisticated ventriloquism and finally to songs having nothing to do with African Americans at all and which especially involved Irish people. Along with the minstrel songs and Irish names, Eliot carefully included a reference to the Jewish “little
Ben Levin the tailor,” whose name and occupation signal his ethnicity. It would be hard to imagine an opening more indebted to popular culture of different groups. Its polyglot nature and its venue of publication reinforce each other. In that way, the poem’s material form reenacts its content, connecting it to multiple networks of modernism and to the insistent references to Jews, Blacks, and Irish that run throughout Eliot’s published as well as unpublished work, for instance to Rachel née Rabinowitz in “Sweeney Among the Nightingales,” to Sweeney himself in the Sweeney poems, and to King Bolo in the *March Hare* notebook. To see that connection, as with so many other works of the modernist period, we need to turn from current readings that often misread and look again at original bibliographic contexts and their implications.

Notes


