Image 1: "A lullaby New Orleans," Arnold Genthe. New York : George H. Doran, 1926.
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Louis Armstrong's "Karnofsky Document": The Reaffirmation of Social Death and the Afterlife of Emotional Labor

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Now I must tell you that my whole life has been happiness. Through all of the misfortunes, etc, I did not plan anything. Life was there for me and I accepted it. And life, whatever came out, has been beautiful to me, and I love everybody.¹

—Louis Armstrong, *the year of his death*, 1971

Tinhorn: *n. Slang.* A petty braggart, especially a gambler, who pretends to be wealthier than he is.

—*American Heritage Dictionary*

Deathbed Blues

The first sign of trouble for America's favorite trickster emerged while on an extended tour of Europe and the Middle East during the summer of 1959. Summoned in the middle of the night, Armstrong's private physician found him on his knees in a hotel room in Spoleto, Italy. He was clinging to his sheets, gasping for air like a fish out of water and running a temperature of 104 degrees. The official story—and the one promoted most vehemently by the fifty-eight-year-old musician—was that Armstrong had suffered a respiratory infection brought on by a bad case of pneumonia. In truth, he had been hit with a severe heart attack after blowing his way through Sweden, Copenhagen, Antwerp, Amsterdam, Hamburg, Vienna, Israel, Lebanon, and Egypt. Performing an average of two shows a day in rapid-fire succession with virtually no time off for physical or emotional recuperation, Armstrong had quite literally blown his heart out.

Refusing to slow down, within five years he was back in the hospital suffering from varicose veins and extreme swelling in his right leg, both ailments caused by poor circulation from his rapidly deteriorating heart condition. When Armstrong knocked the Beatles off the charts in 1964 with "Hello Dolly," his kidneys, liver, and gall bladder were failing. He was finally, and reluctantly, dragged into the office of Dr. Gary Zucker in the fall of 1968. There was really little choice in the matter. Armstrong had difficulty walking and could no longer fit into his shoes. His lungs were filled with fluid, his stomach was distended, and his body was alternately gaunt or bloated out of proportion. He had trouble speaking lengthy sentences let alone singing, and his shallow breathing had long since restricted the tone, frequency, and power of his legendary trumpet—an instrument gradually reduced to an onstage prop alongside his trademark white handkerchief and diplomatic smile.

Although it was clear the court jester was dying, no one dared suggest his role as an alchemist of racial harmony and joy was the poison that was killing him. Armstrong remained the darling of America's pop culture industry to the end. For over five decades he had served on the front lines of emotional

¹ Max Jones and John Chilton, *Louis: The Louis Armstrong Story, 1900–1971* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1988), 9.

combat, a soldier of goodwill during an era of civil strife at home and cold war hostility abroad. There was, of course, some grumbling. A new generation of emotional militants was unwilling to foster any illusions about their discontent with the nation's status quo. In 1968, as inner cities burned, as Black Power gained hold of the Civil Rights Movement, as protests against the Vietnam War raged, as white activists took over the Democratic Convention in Chicago, it was hard to ignore the fact that Armstrong not only remained silent on these issues but chose to record and perform the "Ballad of Davy Crockett" (an ode to the nation's colonial settler foundations), "Zip-a-Dee-Doo-Dah" (a sentimental plantation melody worthy of Thomas Nelson Page), and the song that has probably come to define his public image more than any other, "What a Wonderful World."

And so it was that in the spring of 1969 Louis Armstrong, arguably the most important architect of American popular music, found himself bed-ridden under the personal care of Dr. Zucker in New York City's Beth Israel Hospital where he was pumped with massive amounts of diuretics and forced to undergo an emergency tracheotomy to clear his lungs. Dr. Zucker noted a transformation bordering on the occult in his enigmatic patient. The mask of joviality came off and Armstrong began to meditate gravely on the question of mortality and to reassess the significance of his life and career.²

During one of their intimate sessions, Zucker apparently began to sing a simple melody that Armstrong recognized from his youth. The song was a traditional lullaby brought over to the Americas by the tide of Jewish immigrants who streamed into the United States during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in order to escape the pogroms and economic destitution they faced in Eastern Europe:

Every Night you'll hear her Croon
A Russian Lullaby
Just a little Plaintive Tune
When Baby Starts to Cry
Rock a bye my Baby
Some where there may be
A Land, that's Free
For you and Me
And a Russian Lullaby

Visibly shaken, Armstrong picked up a pen and from his deathbed began to compose a memoir of his coming of age in the Jim Crow South at the turn of the century. The result was a disturbingly vivid seventy-seven page hand-written document he entitled, "Louis Armstrong + the Jewish Family in New Orleans, La, the Year of 1907."³ Discovered more than a decade after he passed away, Armstrong's extended meditation on his years as a young waif hustling to survive on the streets of New Orleans has gradually emerged as one of the most fascinating and certainly most problematic artifacts in contemporary jazz studies. This article will explore the narrative's implications for the restructuring of sentiment in the

² James Lincoln Collier, *Louis Armstrong: An American Genius* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 331.

³ "Louis Armstrong + the Jewish Family in New Orleans, La., the Year of 1907" was actually written in two sections. The first, dated March 31, 1969, was written while Armstrong was still in the hospital and came to fifty-three pages. The remainder was written when he returned to the memoir again in 1970. The document is stored at the Louis Armstrong House and Archives at Queens College/CUNY. When citing Armstrong's writing I have tried to preserve, whenever possible, the style of his unique orthography. Except when otherwise noted, I will therefore *not* rely on the customary "sic" to connote deviations from standard rules of punctuation and grammar, and readers should assume that deviations from the "norm" are a reflection of Armstrong's own, intentional or unintentional, stylistic idiosyncrasies. My own comments will be added in brackets.

twentieth century, in particular as it pertains to the vicissitudes of black suffering and the moral economy of black social death. But before doing so, it will be helpful to sketch an outline of the terrain traversed by Armstrong's wide-ranging deathbed memoir, for I believe many of the document's challenges lie at the intersection of its various elements.

Much of the story that unfolds is devoted to reliving memories of working as a child laborer for a Jewish family, the Karnofskys, when, if the narrative is to be taken literally—and there are some strong arguments for why it should not be—he was just six years old.⁴ Armstrong writes of going out with the family's two eldest sons as they make their rounds through the city peddling wares and of riding on top of their horse-drawn wagon, blowing a small tin horn to get the attention of customers. By any reasonable standards, the hours were long for a child of Armstrong's age. He confesses to working double shifts—waking before five o'clock in the morning to help Alex Karnofsky collect rags, bones, scrap metal, and empty bottles and, after a brief rest, venturing with the older brother Morris into New Orleans' prohibited red-light district at night to sell stone coal for a nickel a bucket to the "*Sporting (Prostitutes) Women, standing in the doorways*."⁵ Throughout, Armstrong writes of these experiences positively and even describes moments of great warmth and tenderness, particularly when he describes being invited into the Karnofsky home to eat dinner between shifts—an act of kindness that clearly had a tremendous impact on a young black child living in an age of rigidly enforced racial apartheid.

Mingled with his tales of child labor is the story of how he first encountered the horn and learned to sing "with feeling." Put simply, the memoir he crafted in the final days of his life overturned multiple assertions he had made on numerous occasions about the context of his early exposure to music. As a result, it has prompted a serious reconsideration not only of Armstrong's introduction to the instrument that would lead him to fame, fortune, and putative emotional reconciliation but also of the role played by New Orleans' Jewish community in the early development of jazz and the black vernacular more broadly. The entire document, after all, exists because Armstrong remembers hearing the very song Dr. Zucker sang to him in Beth Israel Hospital while working for the Karnofskys: "Russian Lullaby," he writes tenderly, "is the song that I sang when I was *Seven* years old — with the *Karnofsky* family when I was working for them, every night at their house when Mother Karnofsky would rock the Baby David to Sleep. Then I would go home — across the track, cross town to *May-Ann* and *Mama Lucy*, my mother and sister." Later in the document he returns to these moments, again describing the emotional release he experienced as the family gathered around the infant Karnofsky, whose circumstances stood in such stark contrast to his own: "I was real relaxed *Singing* the *song* called "*Russian Lullaby*" with the *Karnofsky* family when Mother Karnofsky would have her little *Baby Boy* in her arms, *Rocking* him to sleep. We all sang together until the little baby would doze off." Time and again Armstrong emphasizes the domestic tranquility of the home, crediting the encouragement and financial assistance he received from the family for the development of his own, distinctive musical style: "The Jewish people has such wonderful souls. I always enjoyed *everything* they sang and *Still* do. Of course I *sang* the Lullaby Song with the *family*—I did not go through every song they sang. But I was a good listener. *Still* am. That was a *long* time ago. And I

⁴ Louis Armstrong, *Louis Armstrong, In His Own Words: Selected Writings*, ed. Thomas D. Brothers (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999). Brothers' introduction to the "Karnofsky Document" is short but does an excellent job of summarizing the various contradictions in Armstrong's many versions of his childhood. When read alongside the material and reflections Brothers provides in his appendix, this compilation offers what is still in my opinion the most responsible analysis of Armstrong's personal writings.

⁵ Armstrong, *In His Own Words*, 12–13, italics in original.

Still remember their *Phrases*. When Mrs *Karnofsky* would start singing these words to "Russian Lullaby" we all would get our *places* and sing it. So *soft* and *sweet*. Then *bid* each other *good* night." A pattern begins to emerge. The discovery of music is entangled with the structure and demands of physical labor, the rewards of laboring with the domestic tranquility of the Jewish home.

But if the Karnofsky document opened up fresh vistas into Armstrong's formative experiences in turn-of-the-century New Orleans, inviting jazz enthusiasts to ruminate upon the details of his early musical influences and the subsequent evolution of his iconic style, they have encountered some equally stubborn obstacles that have, to say the least, yet to be resolved. What is most compelling by far about Armstrong's deathbed memoir are the arresting insights it provides into the fragile constitution, the delicate psychology of the man who had spent the better part of his life commoditizing joy for popular consumption. In particular, critics have been unable to reconcile a set of extended, acrimonious commentaries he provides on race—most pointedly his reflections on the relationship between post-emancipation African Americans and what were, at the time, relatively recent Jewish émigrés to the United States.

Studying the psychic effects of terror upon colonized peoples, Michael Taussig encourages us to think of death as a liminal zone, a "threshold that allows for illumination as well as extinction."⁶ What I am proposing in this essay is that when we place Armstrong's narrative next to his lifetime of emotional labor, the irreconcilability of childhood trauma, the consequent repression of his early insecurity in the world, and the central role of music to Armstrong's identity, his deathbed memoir, with all its inconsistencies, begins to gain cohesion. In choosing to inscribe his feelings at this juncture, Armstrong was enacting what Taussig points to as "the mediation of terror through narration," that is, attempting to make sense of his life's trauma through, in this case, the written word. To some extent—whether using his pen, voice, horn, physical gestures, or recording technologies—helping to assuage the sublime, often unspeakable trauma of the American experience was Armstrong's life work. It was a task he had been contracted to perform by a troubled body politic wrestling with collective demons it has yet to excise. Jazz criticism has not only validated this assignment, it has extended the mission into the Armstrong commodity's afterlife. What does it mean to be an arbiter of happiness in a world that is so clearly, so self-evidently *not* happy? To bring joy to a world that continues to reel from economic panic and spectacular forms of socialized violence? Indeed, this challenge, this structural crisis of articulation, if you will, remains one of the defining characteristics of the black aesthetic tradition if not American cultural production itself.⁷ Confronted with "the problem of writing effectively *against* terror" and legacies of historical trauma, we can see how the encounter with a simple melody from his youth, along with the subsequent production of the Karnofsky document on his deathbed, amounted to Armstrong's Rosebud moment.⁸

Making Trauma Legible

"Death," according to the late Lindon Barrett, "is a site obdurately outside all desire and, opposingly, racial blackness a site so fully defined by and within desire it demands regulation, also by definition."⁹ It is

⁶ Michael Taussig, *Shamanism, Colonialism, and the Wild Man: A Study in Terror and Healing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 3–4.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Lindon Barrett, "Dead Men Printed: Tupac Shakur, Biggie Small, and Hip-Hop Eulogy," *Callaloo* 22, no. 2 (1999): 306.

this line between the articulation of desire and the policed boundaries of racial blackness that Armstrong spent his entire life traversing. He sold the structure of joy and the promise of emotional reconciliation with every fiber of his being to a world more than willing to consume such a precious commodity for almost five decades. It may be hard to see the regulation of desire—to recognize the garrison of authority surrounding “the process of subjectivization,” those structures of feeling that an artist helps us articulate and define—at work in the aesthetics of Louis Armstrong. After all, his legacy, like that of the jazz tradition he helped create, is so completely and thoroughly associated with the *deregulation* of black desire, with its aspirations and affirmations, its many affronts to the authority and protocol of form, that to suggest it is driven by repression and containment borders on treason.

Throughout Armstrong’s narrative, however, evidence of the debasement of blackness abounds. The warmth and domestic stability he experiences in the Karnofsky home are placed in stark contrast to the pressures facing his own family who were living, quite literally, on the other side of the tracks from the bustling heart of the Jewish mercantile economy that ran along the length of South Rampart and Canal Streets. The passages detailing the desperate poverty that afflicts his family, while tempered by the devotion he displays for his mother and sister, are painful to read, as when he describes having to scavenge among produce dumpsters for food with Mama Lucy (his younger sister) in the more affluent “Front of Town” section of New Orleans near the waterfront: “And she + I among other kids used to raid those barrels, cut off the spoiled parts and sell them to *restaurants*.” If the struggles are vivid, so too are the neurotic symptoms produced by the social conditions he confronts. They are clear, for instance, in this passage, where he explains to the reader why he wasn’t able to finish his primary education: “I went only to *Fifth* Grade because I had to *work* along with my *schooling*. I wasn’t *fortunate* to have *parents* with enough *money* to *pay*, like some of these *Idiots* whom I see making these *big Soap Box Speeches*, etc. I had to work and help *May Ann*, — put *bread* on the *table*, since it was just the three of us living in this one *big room*, which was *all* that we could afford.” To which Armstrong adds, as if to convince himself as much as the reader, “But we were *happy*.”

On their own accord, such reflections may be sad but they aren’t particularly surprising given what we know about the strain black communities were under in the wake of nominal emancipation. What does make one pause, however, is the persistently bitter tone of Armstrong’s commentary and, in particular, the numerous passages where he attributes blame for the social ills he endured as a child. If Armstrong is eloquent about the fondness he shares for the Karnofsky family, he is equally clear about the deep-seated resentment he harbored towards the black community at the end of his life. Throughout the narrative he compares black values, particularly their work ethic and sense of collective loyalty, unfavorably to those he says he witnessed first-hand in New Orleans’ tight-knit Jewish community. In one such passage he graphically offsets the Jewish response to oppression with African Americans, blaming the latter unequivocally for their failure to overcome the limitations of the post-emancipation South:

I had a long time admiration for the Jewish People . . . Especially with their long time of courage, taking So Much Abuse for so long. I was only *Seven* years old but I could easily see the *ungodly treatment* that the White Folks were handing the poor *Jewish* family whom I worked for . . . We [blacks] *were* lazy and *still* are . . . I will love the *Jewish* people, *all* of my life. The *Negroes* always wanted *pity*. They did that in places of going to work, Instead of *gambling*, *shooting* and *Cutting* up *one* another so much. But real *Meek* when just *one* white man—chase a *hundred Negroes*, just like *Rats* . . . He’s the type of Negro who will *pan* the *White* Man behind *closed* doors—and the minute he *leaves* you, he will *slip* over to some *white* man and *tell* everything that was said against him, get your *head whipped*. And he will be the *first* Negro who

will *Rape* a *white* woman. It happened in *Slavery* days. The *Negroes* has always *connived* against each other' and they *still* do. They never will be like the *Jewish* people.

Biting critiques as harsh and troubling as these are scattered like dense buckshot throughout the memoir. They emerge like discordant notes in the midst of a gripping narrative in which Armstrong lavishes effusive praise on the Karnofsky family, and Jewish culture more generally, while detailing the indolence, vice, and abject subservience of black Americans. The lessons he learns from the Karnofskys include all of the core elements of Washingtonian racial uplift and, indeed, contain the essential tenets of American exceptionalism, notably, an emphasis on the need for blacks to develop a work ethic, exercise economic thrift, maintain collective unity, and refrain from vice: "Working for these fine people, I learned to be an *early* riser just like them," he tells us, "Up Early every morning, making Hay while the Sun Shined . . . I used to love to help *Alex* Karnofsky Hustle up Old Rags + Bones etc. during the day. Get out into that good sunshine." In stark contrast to the Karnofskys, black people abuse one another and pilfer away their money: "They would rather *Lazy Away* their time doing *Nothing*. Or *feel* because they have Diplomas which some of them *should't* have *received* in the *first* place, They feel that the world *owes* them something because of it . . . *Negroes* which were handling *more* money than *those* people' didn't do *anything* but *shoot* craps – played cards all night and all day until they would wind up *broke* – hungry – dirty and funky-smelling." Such reflections do more than simply provide a critique of the black community. Given that the larger context is a review of his early labor history and the simultaneous development of his unique aesthetic, Armstrong is implicitly offering us a critical annotation for how we might understand the substance and emotional authority of his sonic techniques. The implication being that his style evolved in spite of blackness, not because of it.

About a quarter of the way through the memoir, Armstrong performs an abrupt about face, briefly stepping away from his sentimental jeremiad to acknowledge the racial terror that was an inseparable part of the black experience in New Orleans and the Deep South at the turn of the century. In an oft-cited passage used by almost all commentators on the Karnofsky document—typically in lieu of grappling with its more problematic anti-black sections—Armstrong interrupts his invective against the black community to redirect his outrage, temporarily, onto whites. Spelling out the horror and insecurity of black life in no uncertain terms he pinpoints the culprits for the period's anti-black racism:

As far as *us* Negroes, well, I don't have to explain anything. *Am* sure—you already know. At *ten* years old I could see—the Bluffings that those old *Fat Belly Stinking* very *Smelly Dirty* White Folks were *putting Down*. It seemed as though the only thing they *cared* about was their Shot Guns or those Old time *Shot* Guns which they had strapped around them. So they get full of their *Mint Julep* or that *bad* whisky the poor white Trash were Guzzling down, like water, then when they get so *Damn* Drunk until they'd go out of their minds—then it's Nigger Hunting time. *Any* Nigger.

Such reveries on the brutality of southern life and white supremacy do not last long. No sooner has Armstrong begun to touch upon the subordination of black social life than he immediately, as if to catch himself, does an abrupt one-eighty. Transitioning from tales of joyfully accommodating the demands of wage labor as a six-year-old child, he launches into a discussion of chattel slavery. In some of the memoir's most offensive passages, Armstrong offers a set of tortured apologetics for involuntary servitude that tacitly shifts the burden of guilt for the "peculiar institution" onto black shoulders. Parroting the arguments and sentimentalism deployed by historical revisionists who, even as Armstrong was working the streets of New Orleans as a child, were constructing a nostalgic view of the past to rationalize the prolongation of white

patriarchal supremacy, he writes:

My Mother May Ann and my Uncle *Ike* Miles used to tell us about Slavery Times. They said—Slavery wasn't half as bad as some of the History books, would like for you to believe. May Ann and Uncle Ike had a little touch of Slavery. Because their Relatives before them came up' right in it. They said the Slaves, Acted *Dumb* and Ignorant, kept Malice and Hate among themselves so the White took Advantage of it. Especially when they were full of their Mint Juleps.

The very mingling of sound culture, familial dislocation, and Armstrong's extensive discussions of laboring actually help resolve some of the contradictions raised within the deathbed memoir. After all, the primary tension within it is not the Karnofskys per se, but the feelings of safety and comfort he ultimately associated in later life *with* the Karnofskys. As such, the document provides less an opportunity to rewrite his timeline, as many have tried to do based upon its historical inconsistencies, than it does a chance for us to analyze the impact of his early experiences on the production of his sentiments and the formation of his identity. This approach not only allows but forces us to reassess the value of the work he produced over the course of his life. Again, when thinking about Armstrong's relationship with the Karnofskys we must be blunt. We are not just talking about any kind of labor—we are talking about *child* labor with all of its attendant vulnerabilities and estrangements. Whether or not he found sanctuary or work with the Jewish family at such a young age, a question we will return to, this appears to be one of the main engines driving the tension of the document. Furthermore, whether or not his experiences with child labor took place with the Karnofskys, it is fairly certain that such labor left an indelible mark on his psyche.

That Armstrong grew up in the midst of such psychological assaults helps explain his conflicted attempts to rationalize the ultimate irrationality of anti-black terror and the slave experience that erupt throughout his memoir. It is not surprising to me that he analyzes these in terms of their familial (i.e., domestic), community, and economic dimensions—not through the lens of personal shame or bitterness towards the institutions that constrained his freedom. When speaking of the terror and trauma of the black experience, we are not exclusively pointing to the spectacle of lynching or other forms of immanent biopolitical violence. These obviously provide the backdrop for any number of social insecurities, but we must take seriously the vicissitudes of black suffering in its multiple subtle forms. The success of Armstrong's effort to resolve his work as a salesman of joy by returning to the plane of childhood laboring is open to debate. But it is clear that attempting to do so, as he increasingly did during the final years of his life, forced him to shatter the discreet narrative of happiness that had defined him and slowly, inevitably perhaps, enclosed his being with each and every step he made into adulthood and the public sphere. The dominant narrative of "happiness" has long since lost its effectiveness as an argument for explaining Armstrong's power as an artist. There is a hidden transcript at work here that begs to be explored, one that I believe Armstrong made a heroic, if messy, effort to disclose before bidding the world adieu.

Affective Labor: Its Accumulation and Transference

Armstrong is very precise—too precise in fact—about when the events of his memoir take place. He doesn't point generally to his childhood or speak of being a young boy; he indicates in no uncertain terms that he is seven years old and that the year of his employment with the Karnofskys is 1907. Virtually all biographers, with the notable exception of Thomas Brothers, who provides the most convincing explanations for the document's chronological inconsistencies, have accepted this date, using it as an

opportunity to reopen discussions about Armstrong's early timeline. I second Brothers' thesis that the events with the Karnofsky family occurred later in life than Armstrong remembers, but I want to retain the musician's sense of precision in regard to how this period was essential to the production of his sentiment and how the general restructuring of race during the Progressive Era played a significant role in shaping the parameters of the political economy of sound for the twentieth century.

As I have suggested, in looking back on the New Orleans of 1907 Armstrong is indicating the significance of the moment to his development as a person, that is, how it contributed to his process of "subjectification."¹⁰ He is not only drawing attention to the lasting consequences of a life torn between institutional exclusion, structural violence, and economic exploitation; I contend, rather, that since we are essentially reading his deathbed reflections, he is revealing the origins and residual effects of a life spent performing affective labor: a life in which his emotions, along with his physical work, were appropriated, that is to say alienated, as a mechanism for the production of someone else's surplus value. The first decade of the twentieth century is a time, in other words, when the value of black life to the political economy of emotion took on distinctly new forms. As a Progressive Era social experiment, Armstrong learned to adapt to and indeed create alternative constructs of emotion; that is, distinctly modern, distinctly new ways of understanding our individual and collective relation to the labor process and the meaning of citizenship. Examining the contingencies and affiliations between race, labor, and the state, we are able to glimpse in the origin myths that Armstrong constructs to explain the evolution of his voice and horn a process in which affective impulses became, as they still do, commodities for exchange on the market and, simultaneously, mechanisms for the production of intimate subjectivities.

As best as we can gather, from the year 1906 until New Year's Eve 1912—when he was arrested on South Rampart Street and sentenced to juvenile detention for firing a gun into the air—Armstrong worked in what were called the "street trades." This was a catchall term used to describe the work performed by peddlers and low-scale, low-income vendors but was also a term applied to urban children who scraped together odd jobs wherever they could find them. It is clear from the many accounts of his youth that Armstrong, whatever the precise chronology of his early labor history may be, wasn't only working for the Karnofskys: he was a member of a distinct work force. Hundreds of children in New Orleans and thousands of children across Louisiana, black and white, were living a life more or less similar to Armstrong's: selling newspapers, cleaning graves and stoops, delivering coal, hawking advertisements for merchants and musical bands, collecting junk, scavenging for food, and as in Armstrong's case, busking for change with a singing quartet. Recognizing this allows us to see the institutional and social dimensions of the personal experiences Armstrong describes—that is to say, the mechanics of what Hortense Spillers refers to as the "interior inter-subjectivity" of black social life.¹¹ This perspective also helps us understand the intergenerational transmission of affect, a temporal circulation of emotions that implicate "the most intimate to the most public of involvements."¹²

The aspect of the Karnofsky document that most upset the traditional narrative of his youth concerns Armstrong's repeated assertions that he first learned to play the horn while working on the back

¹⁰ See, for instance, Felix Guattari, "On the Production of Subjectivity," chap. 1 in *Chaosmosis* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 1–32.

¹¹ Hortense Spillers, "All the Things You Could Be by Now If Sigmund Freud's Wife Was Your Mother: Psychoanalysis and Race," *Boundary 2* 23, no. 3 (1996), reprinted in *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), p 397.

¹² This quotation was taken from an interview with Hortense Spillers conducted by Tim Haslett for the Black Cultural Studies web site collective in Ithaca, NY February 4, 1998 which has since been removed from their website.

of the family's junk and coal carts: "People thought that my *first horn* was *given* to me at the *Colored Waif's Home for Boys* (the orphanage). But it *wasn't*." To the degree that people had assumed he had picked up the horn when he was twelve or thirteen years old in the juvenile prison it was, of course, because this was what he himself had asserted throughout his two autobiographies, numerous essays, countless letters, and literally dozens of interviews.¹³ In his deathbed memoir, however, he suddenly recounts a much different story:

When I would be on the *Junk* wagon with *Alex Karnofsky* . . . I had a little *Tin Horn* — the kind the people *celebrates* with. — I would *blow* this long tin *horn* without the *Top* on it, *Just* — hold my *fingers close* together. Blow it, as a *call* for old Rags — *Bones* — *Bottles* or *Anything* that the people and kids had to *sell*. The *kids* would bring *bottles* and receive *pennies* from *Alex*.

A short time later he both repeats and augments this fresh account of his early exposure to the horn:

Alex bought for me a Tin Horn. To blow and blow, the kind of a Tin Horn they use at Parties to make noises, while celebrating. The Children loved it. One day — I took the wooden top off of the horn, and surprisingly I held my *two* fingers close together where the wooden mouthpiece used to be, and I could play a tune of some kind. Oh' the kids really enjoyed that. Better than the first time. They used to bring their bottles, Alex would give them a few pennies, and they would stand around the wagon while I would entertain them.

It is within the context of labor that I want to recognize Armstrong's early encounter with the horn. The above passages are fascinating not only for how they call into question the chronology of his encounter but also in what they signify in terms of his essential relationship with the instrument that was to become his primary vehicle out of poverty and into a life of fame and fortune. When we think of Armstrong's horn as a mode of articulating "happiness," "liberty," and "freedom," as we are typically accustomed to doing, this version of events indicates that the structures of feeling he developed were immediately infused with the rhythms and demands, the functional logic, of the underground market

¹³ None of the biographies written during Armstrong's life mention the Karnofskys. Max Jones and John Chilton, authors of *Louis: The Louis Armstrong Story*, published in 1971, the year of his death, make a one-sentence reference to his being "employed in the Konowski family's coal business, where his task was to fill up the buckets on the wagon and try to sell them with cries of 'Stone coal, ladies, five cents a water bucket.'" But there is no mention of his encounter with the horn. After Armstrong's passing away, the first biography to truly grapple with the economic and social complexities of his upbringing was James Lincoln Collier's 1983 biography, *Louis Armstrong: An American Genius*. It represents an admirable turning point in that, despite not having had access to any of Armstrong's archival material, Collier managed to track down people who had known Armstrong and began the painstaking work of reassembling the conflicting details of his life story. In doing so, the book upset a lot of Armstrong devotees for how it challenged some of the most sacred mythologies about Armstrong's life. For instance, critics attacked Collier's underlying thesis that Armstrong's so-called genius flowed from his early experiences with racism, his broken family, and the open sexual climate of New Orleans. They also took umbrage at his claim that Armstrong's greatest work was done with the Hot Fives and Sevens, after which point he became hobbled by commercialism, mediocrity, and a tendency to reproduce predictable solo structures while playing tacky novelty songs. The mission to dispute such claims still appears to be one of the primary thrusts of Armstrong scholarship. Ricky Riccardi has recently devoted an entire manuscript, *What a Wonderful World*, almost exclusively to salvaging Armstrong's latter work. Gary Giddins was the first writer to incorporate the Karnofsky document into his analysis of Armstrong's life, but citing Sidney Bechet's and Bunk Johnson's testimony that they remember Armstrong playing a horn as early as 1911—two years before his arrest and sentence to the Waif's Home—lends its version of events serious credibility. Referring to it as an "obsessive *cri du Coeur* (cry for help)," Giddins, like Riccardi, is attempting to salvage Armstrong's reputation from the historical slander that he was an "Uncle Tom" and refute the criticisms made by Collier of the work Armstrong produced after coming under what Giddins apologetically refers to as the "benevolent dictatorship" of his long-time manager Joe Glaser. See James Lincoln Collier, *Louis Armstrong: An American Genius* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 19; Gary Giddins, *Satchmo: The Genius of Louis Armstrong* (New York: De Capo Press, 1988), 35; Ricky Riccardi, *What a Wonderful World: The Magic of Louis Armstrong's Later Years* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2011).

economy. Armstrong was performing a service for the Karnofskys—for which he was paid both formally in the shape of wages and informally in the form of food, shelter, and both physical and emotional security. The work, in other words, positions Armstrong's body and the tin horn he plays directly within the framework of emotional and affective labor. It draws our attention to the status of both the tin horn and Armstrong as commodities whose use-value, in addition to creating or, if you will, producing joy, is evidenced in their ability to emotionally mediate the process of exchange. Armstrong is, at the tender age of seven, already a distinctly modern form of human capital, one that will trace the changes in the political economy from one based upon the dominant forms of industrial labor that marked the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to one that increasingly functioned along what has (often erroneously in my opinion) been called the "immaterial" networks of value production and exchange that mark the emotional, affective, information- and service-based economies. Examining Armstrong's psychic fracture helps us to recognize the historical continuities of emotional violation and to place it within its proper social, political and economic context. His crisis, moreover, inaugurated at the turn of the century when black bodies were being subordinated under the terms of twentieth century modernity, ought to be understood as the prototype of a more endemic contemporary crisis that had already firmly taken hold when he was on his deathbed in 1971.¹⁴

Each of Armstrong's revisions of his encounter with the horn place it within the context of a complex web of economic and emotional processes. Not only does he claim to have played a small tin horn on the back of the junk and coal carts, he makes the assertion that the Karnofsky family helped him purchase his first cornet and provided him with his earliest real emotional encouragement to play and sing. In this passage, note the convergence between physical labor, affective labor, commodity fetishism, and the self-control implied in learning the art of economic thrift:

One day when I was on the wagon with Morris Karnofsky — we were on Rampart and Perdido Streets and we passed a Pawn Shop which had in it's Window — an old tarnished beat up' "B" Flat Cornet. It only cost *Five* Dollars. Morris advanced me Two Dollars on my Salary. Then I put aside Fifty Cents each week from my small pay — finally the Cornet was Paid for in full. Boy was *I* a happy Kid.

The little Cornet was real dirty and had turned real black. Morris cleaned my little cornet with some Brass Polish and poured some Insurance Oil all through it, which Sterilized the inside.

After *blowing* into it a while I realized that I could play "*Home Sweet Home*" — then *here* come the *Blues*. From *then* on, I was a *mess* and *Tootin* away. I *kept* that *horn* for a *long* time. I *played* it *all through* the *days* of the *Honky Tonk*.

It makes little difference, if my thesis is correct, whether or not this account is literally true. In fact, I believe it may lend credence to my argument if it is not. Right away, for instance, we notice some interesting parallels with the other dominant version of his exposure to the horn, a bugle, at the Colored Waif's Home, when he was a teenager. In those accounts he tells of how, after being promoted to the

¹⁴ According to the labor theory of value, of course, the distinctive quality of human labor lies in its peculiar ability to create value in excess of what is used up, or if you will, lost, in the production process: that is, to create value in excess of the wages (variable capital) the employer extends to the worker. In the case of Armstrong, his contribution to the exchange process was his ability to manipulate the field of desire, to help transform junk into objects of worth by attracting consumers who would be willing to trade them for pennies. Although it is beyond the immediate scope of this essay, I am pointing to a way of considering the relationship between sound culture, and the black aesthetic more generally, and the increasing importance of the affective economy to modern capitalism.

instrument, he immediately set about shining the dirty, green, beat up horn until it was “gleaming bright.” And there are other inconsistencies with the version Armstrong gives of his encounter with the tin horn on his deathbed that I believe force us to look for other, less literal motives for producing the document. In *Satchmo: My Life In New Orleans*, published in 1954, as well as in Merryman’s *Life Magazine* interview of 1966, conducted just three years previous to his writing the Karnofsky memoir, he claims that it was the Waif Home’s musical director, Peter Davis, who first taught him the song “Home, Sweet Home” on the cornet. A decade and a half earlier, Armstrong had recounted the story of working on the back of a junk wagon, “going all over the city to collect rags, bones and bottles from the rich as well as the poor,” but it is not with the Karnofskys but instead with an old man named Lorenzo, and it was placed after, not before, he left the Waif’s Home. In writing about collecting junk around town, he essentially repeats verbatim the story of the encounter with the tin horn he gives in the Karnofsky document, but in the 1954 version it is Lorenzo, not Armstrong, who actually performs on the instrument from the back of the cart while Louis sings accompaniment:

Lorenzo had an old tin horn which he used to blow without the mouthpiece, and he could actually play a tune on it, and with feeling too. It was one of those long tin horns with a wooden mouthpiece which people used to buy to celebrate Christmas and New Years. It used to knock me out to hear him play a real tune to call people out of their houses and back yards.

When I was with him I was in my element. The things he said about music held me spellbound, and he blew that beat-up tin horn with such warmth that I felt as though I was sitting with a good cornet player.

The story of working with “Lonzo” as he plays his tin horn on the back of the wagon is repeated in the 1966 interview with *Life* and, again, Armstrong places the incident after his release from the Waif’s Home, not when he was a seven-year-old child. This same interview also mentions borrowing money from a white boy, Charlie, “the ofay fellow [who] supplied me with papers when I was a newsboy” to purchase his first nickel-plated cornet for \$10 from “Uncle Jake’s pawn shop.” Armstrong’s memory appears so vivid that he even recalled the name of the obscure company who made the horn: “It was a Tonk Brothers — ain’t never heard of them.”¹⁵ He then goes on to tell of how his mentor, Joe “King” Oliver got so sick of looking at the beat up Tonk Brothers horn that he gave Armstrong his old York model Cornet. As in his other versions, he describes cleaning the instrument, transforming its condition with scalding water and elbow grease. Why the variations of an essentially simple story? Why the constant transference of values in the origin tale?

Thomas Brothers, who not only introduced the Karnofsky document to a general audience but raised the bar on how we understand Armstrong’s early years with his extensively researched and thoroughly insightful biography, *Louis Armstrong’s New Orleans*, provides a convincing reading of Armstrong’s alleged relationship with Lorenzo as well as his conflicting versions of when and how he encountered his first horn.¹⁶ Placing Armstrong’s experience on Lorenzo’s junk cart within the context of work songs and the transmission of the “blues” out of the nineteenth century, Brothers is concerned, primarily, with tracing the circulation and exchange of vernacular lineages. His study focuses on Armstrong as an organizer of sound and vernacular techniques, placing his musical style within the complex swirl of ethnic relations in early New Orleans. He helps us untangle and demystify the shifting

¹⁵ “An Interview with Louis Armstrong,” by Richard Merryman, *Life Magazine*, April 15, 1966, 104.

¹⁶ Thomas Brothers, *Louis Armstrong’s New Orleans* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2006), 55–73, 74–97.

dynamics of creole, European, and black influences on the emergence of jazz. Still, at the end of the day *Brothers* offers us an essentially triumphalist narrative. In order to accede to it fully, one must subscribe to a view of Armstrong's music that affirms the steady liberation of voice, not one that understands our voices and emotions as locked into a process of degradation and containment that is becoming ever more threatening.

We become invested in such narratives of uplift, of course, because of the emotional power of Armstrong's music, its ability to capture so many of the beauties and contradictions of the modern world. But we are also drawn to them because they affirm a cherished conception of liberal humanism's promise, particularly as expressed through western forms of political and economic practice along with the cultural revolutions that have distinguished the American experience. For the purposes of this essay, however, I am more interested in looking at the interventions in Armstrong's voice. Instead of seeing him purely as an organizer of sound and vernacular technique in opposition to dominant authority and new forms of capitalist exploitation, I see his music as a response to an incipient, more intense stage of emotional violation. While jazz critics have placed Armstrong's voice within the context of the spatial restrictions limiting black mobility in New Orleans, I see his early encounter with the horn as indicating a poetic voice not only on the run, but on the defensive, a voice that was damaged in its attempt to respond to an era of social engineering and the new structures of emotional terror that allowed assimilation only under a set of highly restricted terms.

In the midst of all the discrepancies it is labor and/or incarceration that provide the unifying theme to Armstrong's accounts of his first encounter with the horn. The narrative indisputably details the formative stages of his life as a social subject: as a laborer and, in particular, the ways in which the estrangement of his youth mingled with his attachment to the process of articulation—primarily, or at least most famously, in the expression of his voice through singing and playing the horn. Above all, the year 1907 marks the beginning of Armstrong's coming to consciousness, a process that converges with his first real awareness of social injustice, the poverty of his family, and the reality of his essential vulnerability—his frightening "aloneness" in the world. To be blunt, the general moment represents the beginning of his explicit transformation into both a commoditized being and a subordinated citizen, a transformation obviously marked by the most severe mental and emotional stress. Armstrong's childhood awakening took place, as I have mentioned, during a period of social engineering at every level of American society. His memoir helps us appreciate the lasting impact of these changes on the collective psyche of black communities and the modern ordering of race relations. It is squarely within this context that I argue for Armstrong's voice and horn as technologies of repression as well as self-realization. Above all, his deathbed memoir marks an attempt to retrace and rationalize the formation and development of his character and aesthetic, that is to say, his techniques of articulation. This project entailed honing tactics of self-control and self-regulation: the auto-surveillance of his body, emotions, inflections, and voice.

Video 1: Louis Armstrong & Peter Davis, "I've Got a Secret," 1965.

View at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3998/mp.9460447.0009.105>

Progressive Errors

Armstrong might not have “planned anything,” as he suggests in the epigraph, but we can rest assured that those around him certainly did. The first decade of the century marked the height of the Progressive Era. It was a time when the social engineering of virtually every aspect of civil society was in full bloom. The Karnofsky Document helps us understand the extent to which Armstrong was a product of this transformative experiment sweeping the nation during his childhood. Much of Armstrong’s success as an entertainer was due to his ability to navigate the contested fault lines between right and left, black and white, rich and poor, young and old—skills he acquired surviving on the streets of the Crescent City, where the changes of the reform movement were felt more intensely than almost anywhere else in the nation. From the scientific management of capital, to the systematic ordering of the municipal sphere, to the regulation of personal behavior, blueprints were drawn and policies implemented that would shape the character of American society into the twenty-first century. With its focus on governmental reform, trust busting, and moral fundamentalism, the Progressive Era was the incubator of a dominant current within American liberal democracy, and the sounds emanating from Armstrong’s voice and horn were not exempt from their influence. Although the movement was broad, representing a diverse set of agendas and internal contradictions, one thing we can say with certainty is that the period marked a hardening of black political, economic, and social displacement. It was a “progressive” movement that made the disavowal of black suffering safe for the majority of white Americans, establishing the terms of racial subordination under which we still live.

In New Orleans, the Democratic Party experienced a decisive resurgence during the 1890s. While this is not the place for a comprehensive review of the era, let us just note that the city led the way in manipulating interpretations of the Thirteenth Amendment to transform the nation from a slave democracy into a penal democracy.¹⁷ The most obvious example is *Plessy v. Ferguson*, which emerged out of Progressive Era New Orleans and successfully restructured the Fourteenth Amendment. All of this is well known, yet very few, if any, analyses of Armstrong’s childhood have sufficiently incorporated this reality into their evaluation of his early years or, for that matter, the development of jazz and the black aesthetic at the turn of the century. This oversight is all the more remarkable given that such dynamics—however abstract the anxieties and archaic the ideologies may appear to us today—were being actively debated *everywhere* at the time that Armstrong was allegedly working for the Karnofsky family. The question of child labor in particular was explicitly on the forefront of the nation’s political and legislative agenda during the first decade of the century when the Karnofsky narrative is set. Public debates raged about the consequences of allowing children to work in the nation’s industrial factories, mines, fields, tenements, and canneries. On any given day, anywhere in the country, one could open a newspaper and read articles and editorials on the impact of labor upon the physical, mental, and moral development of the child. Journalists followed the activities of child welfare organizations and reported extensively on the proceedings of the many national and state conferences devoted to the question. Progressive Era reformers used every available forum to aggressively link the issue of childhood labor to any number of political agendas, from compulsory education to the salvation of capitalism to the very survival of the human species. In 1907 the character and health of the child was a nexus, a connecting tissue binding the late nineteenth and early twentieth century transition into modernity.

¹⁷ Joy James, “Introduction: Democracy and Captivity,” in *The New Abolitionists: (Neo) Slave Narratives and Contemporary Prison Writings*, ed. Joy James (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005), xxi.

Armstrong's early exposure to music took place in the wake of Populism's dramatic failure to unify the interests of black and white workers throughout the country but particularly those toiling in the agricultural heartland. The unwillingness of white Populists to forge credible alliances with their black counterparts, post-emancipation blacks who had formed radical organizations such as the Colored Farmer's Alliance, was a major factor leading to the mass emigration of blacks away from the plantation economy, where they had essentially been reduced to serfs, subordinated by peonage on the one hand and racial terror on the other. History shows that leaders of the black populist movement, who might have provided something of a social and political foundation for the next generation of children like Armstrong, were systematically assassinated and/or dispossessed of their land titles. Lynch mobs and militias, meanwhile, curtailed the autonomy of black individuals while keeping black communities strictly confined within rigid spatial boundaries they dared not transgress without risking the most brutal of sanctions.¹⁸ In the wake of the exodus, families like those headed by Armstrong's mother and father were living in congested, poverty stricken, defenseless neighborhoods with no political representation. Not surprisingly, they were riddled with any number of stress-related disorders as is evidenced by the nicknames they bore, like "the Battlefield" where Armstrong was raised. These enclaves were, in essence, refugee camps for a war-weary populace.

The rupture between anti-immigrant (including anti-Jewish) and anti-black sentiment that Armstrong refers to in his document was more than simply discursive or ideological, it was aggressively played out in the streets of New Orleans, determining how the social surplus was accumulated and distributed. It was also central to how the law was adjudicated. During Armstrong's first decade of life, interethnic struggles were being played out most dramatically along the city's docks and warehouses, where he and his sister roamed for food and, one imagines, picked through garbage for other useful items (making them de facto competitors, not allies, in the scramble for the city's scant resources). The labor struggles in New Orleans were marked by regular mass rallies of thousands of trade unionists and wildcat strikes that often erupted into violence. These showdowns were national news, followed closely by capital and labor throughout the nation, and although he may not have understood their import, Armstrong must have encountered them as a child. Indeed, the failed effort to unify the working-class interests of white and black laborers along the waterfront—home to its longshoremen, screwmen (the workers who bundled and packed cotton bales), freight handlers, and coal wheelers—meant that the city's miscegenation zones, its mercantile and underground financial arteries of immigrants, creoles, ex-slaves and poor whites, often resembled a bloody "battleground on which employers and workers continually struggled to define the character of labor relations."¹⁹ While truly progressive alliances may have been doomed from the get-go, if these attempts to forge interracial and interethnic solidarity in New Orleans had been successful, given the city's crucial role as the conduit of commerce and exchange, it might have changed the distribution of the nation's social surplus, altered the political face of power throughout the country, and tipped the scale of capitalism in labor's favor for the duration of the twentieth century. It is little wonder, therefore, that the New Orleans of Armstrong's youth was governed by an unprecedented degree of biopolitical surveillance and heavy-handed social control.²⁰

¹⁸ Omar H. Ali, *In the Lion's Mouth: Black Populism in the New South, 1886–1900* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2010).

¹⁹ Eric Arnesen, *Waterfront Workers of New Orleans: Race, Class, and Politics, 1863–1923* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 160.

²⁰ Arnesen, *Waterfront Workers*.

The impetus for early-twentieth-century legislation regulating child labor was an outgrowth of such larger struggles over the terms regulating labor and capital. Fair wages may have been at the heart of fights over how American capitalism would and should look as the industrial revolution took hold of the national economy, but they were also always about more than simply alleviating the financial theft of surplus value from the sweat of labor. They were about addressing questions of alienation and estrangement in all its forms as well as more philosophical questions pertaining to humanism, liberal or otherwise, and the alleged universal “rights of man.” This meant that the exploitation of labor and, indeed, the very imposition of the wage system were discussed in terms of the wholesome development of the individual and society in ways that were more radical and nuanced than they are today. As early as 1876 the Working Men’s Party, one of the largest early labor organizations in the United States, formally called for the end of factory labor for children under the age of fourteen, arguing the connection between coerced labor and subordination to the wage labor system. Ten years later, the Knights of Labor made the abolition of child and convict labor one of the central demands in their fight against employers and factory bosses during the Gilded Age. Progressive Era political reformists, however, drew a rigid divide between black and white children. In doing so, they pointed to the continuities between the oppression of the industrial worker (and thus industrial society) and the plantation slave. Indeed, the bloody, fiercely contested trade union wars of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century placed the issue of white child exploitation on the front burner along with the demand for the eight-hour day, equal pay for equal work, and a range of legislative reforms that included, among other things, a graduated income tax. Figures such as Samuel Gompers of the American Federation of Labor used white child labor as an emotional wedge issue in negotiations over wages and the length of the working day. Even more radical advocates of labor rights, such as Mother Jones and organizations like the Industrial Workers of the World, built on the polemical framing of white child labor by the First International and its primary theorist, Karl Marx, who had repeatedly used the European child, most famously in the first volume of *Capital*, to illustrate the devastating end limits of capitalist exploitation. Here, for example, Marx cites one newspaper account of a young child of Armstrong’s age:

William Wood, 9 years old, was 7 years and 10 months when he began to work. He “ran moulds” (carried ready-moulded articles into the drying room, afterwards bringing back the empty mould) from the beginning. He came to work every day in the week at 6 a.m., and left off about 9 p.m. “I work till 9 o’clock at night six days in the week. I have done so seven or eight weeks.” Fifteen hours of labour for a child 7 years old!²¹

So, during the Progressive Era, the child, indeed “childhood” as a social category, was a site of careful, even obsessive, attention. When Armstrong was working in the street trades, calls for the elimination of children from the work force were being debated at every level of American society. By the twentieth century, the image of the working child had become virtually synonymous with the fundamental structural inequalities of the capitalist wage-labor system. Of particular concern to reformers on all sides of the political spectrum was how the child served as the locus of emotion, an incubator if you will, for the production of affect. On the one hand, there was a personal, indeed hermetic and reverential, element in the modern conception of childhood, one that proposed to honor and nurture the autonomy and integrity of the feelings of the young. On the other hand, the objective of public policy was to guide,

²¹ Marx, Karl. *Capital: A Critical Analysis of Capitalist Production*. Vol. 1. 1887. Reprint. (London: Forgotten Books, 2013), 228–29.

manage, and mold the child's development towards the greater interests of society. If childhood sentiment was looked upon as pure, a virtual sacred ground, there was a decidedly social investment in the child's emotional well-being that linked her or his status to the emotional health of society at large. The terms of Social Darwinism, the dominant governing ideology of the time, implied that a healthy democracy demanded a healthy citizenry and, as such, the child became a veritable garden ripe for the horticulture of moral sentiments. It almost goes without saying—and thus too often has—that in the new South in which Armstrong grew up, black children, like the black communities they belonged to, were seen not only as outside of this project but as antithetical to it, and thus a threat to the sanctity of its well-being.

Image 2: International Worker's Day parade, May 1, 1909, New York City. "Abolish Child Labor!" Yiddish and English. Courtesy Library of Congress.

Nowhere, aside from the closely connected struggle for women's suffrage, were racist ideologies disclosed in such an unembellished manner than in debates about child labor; nowhere was the dichotomy between the political fortunes of black and white communities rationalized more transparently. Governor Vardaman of Mississippi succinctly illustrated how views of the child were put to racist use in the civic sphere when he expressed the dominant opinion of Southern reformers in an address to his state legislature in early 1908: "There must be a moral substratum upon which to build, or you cannot make a desirable citizen," he declared. "The negro, as a race, is devoid of that element. He has never felt the guilt of sin, and the restraining influence of moral scruples or the goading of an outraged conscience are

unknown to the real negro.”²² By the turn of the century, such views were not merely common, they extended to virtually every level of society, constraining and guiding the development of Armstrong’s voice and strategies of articulation.

To cite an example of the breadth of the contradictions found within the Progressive Movement’s racial and emotional contours, we might consider briefly the work of two of New Orleans’ most vocal, visible, and celebrated social reformers, Kate and Jean Gordon. Members of the city’s wealthy, Protestant, power elite, the Gordon sisters enjoyed a national reputation as leaders in the women’s suffrage movement and as socialite reformers on a host of critical issues on their home turf in Louisiana. In addition to their focus on child labor reform, the two advocated and co-sponsored legislation for “the prevention of cruelty to animals, for the treatment and control of tuberculosis, for the provision of rubber tires on ambulances, for the admission of women to Tulane Medical School.”²³ Believers in the Social Darwinist and scientific management principles of the time, they were actively re-engineering the city of New Orleans when Armstrong was at work as a youngster in the city’s street trades. “Miss Jean” and “Miss Kate” used their leverage to directly advance their Southern Democratic vision of women’s rights within City Hall and to national leaders, including the famed suffragist Susan B. Anthony. Their influence ultimately extended all the way to the White House. Both sisters were open, pathological, and unrepentant racists to the end, and each used racial phobias to advance their long list of progressive issues. Women’s emancipation, like all of their reform initiatives, was explicitly intended to offset black efforts for liberation and uplift: “The question of white supremacy,” Kate argued in a *Daily Picayune* editorial in 1901, just a month before Armstrong was born,

is one that will only be decided by giving the right of the ballot to the educated, intelligent white woman of the South. . . . Their vote will eliminate the question of the negro vote in politics, and it will be a glad, free day for the South when the ballot is placed in the hands of its intelligent, cultured, pure and noble womanhood. . . . The South, true to its traditions, will trust its women, and thus placing in their hands the balance of power, the negro as a disturbing element in politics will disappear.²⁴

While Kate was assuming a prominent role on the national stage with her efforts to shape federal policy under a rubric of anti-blackness, Miss Jean was assuming a central position within New Orleans and Louisiana state politics by using similar means. The primary vehicle for her work as a city- and state-level social reformer was the issue of child labor reform. Like her suffragist sister, she framed her child advocacy within explicitly racist parameters, an obsession that ultimately led her into a lifelong involvement with the eugenics movement.²⁵ In 1906 a joint effort by Republicans in the House and Senate

²² “Vardaman’s Message to Mississippi Lawmakers,” *Times-Picayune*, January 10, 1908, 11

²³ Kathryn W. Kemp, “Jean and Kate Gordon: New Orleans Social Reformers, 1898–1933,” *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association* 24, no. 4 (1983): 390. See also Elna C. Green, “The Rest of the Story: Kate Gordon and the Opposition to the Nineteenth Amendment in the South,” *Louisiana History* 33, no. 2 (1992): 171–189; and B. H. Gilley, “Kate Gordon and Louisiana Woman Suffrage,” *Louisiana History* 24, no. 3 (1983): 289–306.

²⁴ *Daily Picayune*, July 7, 1901, quoted in Kemp, “Jean and Kate Gordon,” 392.

²⁵ In her tours of state and city factories as inspector general, Jean Gordon came into direct contact with New Orleans’ working poor. Shocked by their decrepit condition, she began to systematically target the children of the underclass, many of whom she deemed mentally and morally deficient. Within a few years she had raised private funds to establish the Milne Home for Destitute Orphan Girls, an institution whose primary purpose was “eugenically segregating and sterilizing” young white women for the preservation of “the race.” She ultimately devoted her life to the state’s eugenic movement. Edward J. Larson, *Sex, Race and Science: Eugenics in the Deep South* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 77–78.

attempted to pass legislation at the Federal level banning child labor from the nation's factories and mines. Although it failed, the bill sparked a wave of debates around the nation and led to the implementation of increasingly stringent reform measures on a state-by-state level, including those in the Deep South like Louisiana.²⁶ When Armstrong claims to have been working with the Karnofskys, progressive reformers like Jean Gordon were deeply engaged in crafting legislation that would eventually, in 1908, lead to the Kaliski-Gordon Bill, the state's first effective child labor act. The act was primarily aimed at restricting night work, "prohibit[ing] boys under 16 and girls under 18 from working between the hours of 7 p.m. and 6 a.m." Indicating the extent to which such reforms were part-in-parcel of more intense efforts to regulate and discipline the city's biopolitical emotional boundaries, it expanded the set of occupations that would fall under the bill's jurisdiction to include, "concert halls, places where intoxicating liquors are sold, bowling alleys, bootblack establishments, freight or passenger elevators, messenger service, or any other occupation which might be deemed unhealthful or dangerous."²⁷ Given such constraints on his age and race, can there be any wonder that Armstrong's memories would be clouded by the effects of post-traumatic stress?

Moral reform during the period cut two ways. With one edge, American and especially white Southern society was overcome by all-consuming fears of a hostile racial takeover of civil society by blacks, Jews, and other non-Anglo, non-Protestant immigrant groups from Southern and Eastern Europe. The other edge was honed by a growing anxiety about the degeneration of the once pure white racial stock from within. According to Social Darwinism, evolution presumed its opposite: devolution. The question of child labor was therefore organized around a "race suicide" hysteria that swept the nation during the first decade of the twentieth century. Such phobias had the effect of unifying New Orleans' Jewish and black communities. One article in the New Orleans *Daily Picayune* reported on Jean Gordon's speech at a national conference of charities in which she attempted to quell fears about her efforts to pass a national compulsory education law for white children:

Miss Gordon said that in her experience as a factory inspector she has never found a Jew or a negro child in a mill, factory, or department store in Louisiana. They are at school being well nourished, playing out in the glorious Southern sunlight, waxing strong and fat. "It is only your little white-faced shrunken-chested, curved-back white Christians," said Miss Gordon, "who are in the mills and department stores of New Orleans."²⁸

Deep-seated anxieties about the survival of the white race abounded, permeating debates on the child labor question. Throughout the nineteenth century and during the Progressive Era, the fear of an impending slide of the white race into a form of neo-slavery was expressed at every turn.²⁹ One widely read study

²⁶ William G. Whittaker, *Child Labor in America: History, Policy and Legislative Issues*, RL31501 (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, 2005), http://digitalcommons.ilr.cornell.edu/key_workplace/202/.

²⁷ Miriam E. Loughram, "The Historical Development of Child-Labor Legislation in the United States" (PhD diss., Catholic University of America, Washington, D.C., 1921), 31–32.

²⁸ *Daily Picayune*, May 11, 1908, 12.

²⁹ This begs us to consider the debates, or rather the observations, made by Saidiya Hartman, Frank Wilderson, Fred Moten, Jared Sexton, and others concerning the "afterlife" of slavery: the disavowal of slave trauma and its emotive appropriation at the behest of European trans-Atlantic radical movements. As Sexton notes, "The disqualification of black resistance is not unrelated to the peculiar and long-standing cross-racial phenomenon in which the white bourgeois and proletarian revolutions on both sides of the Atlantic can allegorize themselves as revolts against slavery, while the hemispheric black struggle against actually existing slavery and its afterlife cannot authorize itself literally in those same terms." Jared Sexton, "People-of-Color-Blindness: Notes on the Afterlife of Slavery," *Social Text* 28, no. 2 (2010): 42. See also the extended discussion on the uses and abuses of slave allegory in, Susan Buck-Morss, "Hegel and Haiti," *Critical Inquiry* 26, no. 4 (2000): 821–865.

from the late Progressive Era (whose title alone, *Children in Bondage: A Complete and Careful Presentation of the Anxious problem of child labor – its causes, its crimes, and its cure*, reveals as much about the affective terrain I am pointing to than any careful explication might provide) made the analogy between the labor of white children and the servitude of the former slave in no uncertain terms:

This new slavery of the mills is worse than the old slavery of the cotton fields. For the negro of the old days was well fed and sure of shelter; he did his work under the open sky, singing as he toiled, and *finding time to weave out of his mystic brain a wild balladry and a poetic folklore*. But the slavery of the white women and children sucks life dry of all vigor and joy. These white workers are stunted, slow, and sad; their lives are emptied of passion and poetry. . . . It is now the white child who is in bondage, while the little darkey is out in the cotton fields under the open heavens.³⁰

The sentimental pathos of plantation romanticism, the projection of the slave as happy, content, lazy, or simply infused with the lyrical and rhythmic nature to withstand their condition, says less about what black joy invokes for whites than about the persistent anxiety over what the idea of black misery will provoke in the mind of its white listeners. This observation is just one of the more brilliant restructurings of the sentimental politics and emotional economies circulating in, through and out of the slave era made by Saidiya Hartman. Her analysis of the interracial ontology, the clash of subjectivities that imposes a disavowal of black suffering, demonstrates how slavery's traumas, the suffering of the slave, has worked as a blueprint for the production of white affect: a way to measure the suffering or impending suffering of the European American. While Armstrong's stunning comments on slavery amount to a refusal of the slave's claim for emotional or financial remuneration, of any grounds for recompense for the exploitation and violation of the black body, we ought to see them in this light. The pressure upon Armstrong to perform happiness with rigorous intensity began young, during a time when the expression of anti-blackness was virtually the only acceptable form of audible expression allowed.

The intersection of Armstrong's child work history, the performance of affective labor in the street trades, and the racial phobias that governed articulation during the regressive era of public policy that I am trying to draw our attention to was not a new phenomenon for the trans-Atlantic black subject. But I am arguing that Armstrong grew up at a time when the performance and containment of interracial emotional rituals was undergoing a structural transition from the fiddle and bones of the agrarian plantation and minstrel stage to the modern demands, the industrial rhythms of the factory, institutional alienation, the imposition of racial silence, and a fateful, if coerced, accession to the reality of racial terror. Such social tensions permeated the affective/emotional exchanges between Armstrong, Mother Karnofsky, and the baby David just as surely as they did Armstrong's mediation of commodity relations on the back of Alex and Morris' coal and junk carts.

Conclusion: “*nothing but ringing and twisting and jumping and bumping*”

“I’m always wondering if it would have been best in my life if I’d just stayed like I was in New Orleans, having a ball,” Armstrong confessed in a 1966 interview with *Life Magazine*; “seems like I was more content, more relaxed growing up in New Orleans — just being around, playing with the old

³⁰ Edwin Markham, Benjamin B. Lindsey, and George Creel, *Children in Bondage: A Complete and Careful Presentation of the Anxious Problem of Child Labor—Its Causes, Its Crimes, and Its Cure* (New York: Hearst's International Library, 1914), 48–49; italics mine.

timers.”³¹ These are ironic words coming from a man who had spent the better part of his life projecting an aura of content, almost militant happiness to the world. They certainly fly in the face of most standard depictions of his childhood. Although he rarely visited New Orleans after his departure, from the moment he left the city to join his legendary mentor Joe Oliver and his band at the Lincoln Gardens in Chicago, Armstrong attempted to return, both in word and song, to the days of his childhood growing up in the streets and dance halls of the Crescent City. Throughout his music, writings, interviews, and taped reflections, the city emerges as a romanticized, almost mystical site; it is by far his most common point of reference.³² The city played the role of a tangible protagonist.

The 1966 interview—conducted when his body was beginning to rapidly deteriorate from the terminal illness that would claim his life five years later—represents a significant turning point. In it, he begins to publicly express the deep sense of emotional irresolution and even bitterness that had accumulated within him over the course of his life. This discontent extended well beyond the difficult years of his childhood to include a sharp, if muted, critique of the burden attendant on his status as a corporate, international icon. Among other comments, he offers the following acidic reflections on the toll that his career had taken on his mind and body over the years:

[A]ll those with their phony poor this, poor that, always got their hand out every time they catch you. What do they do when I ain't around? And this life I got, few can do it, making those gigs sometimes seven days a week — feel like I spent nine thousand hours on buses, planes, getting there just in time to play with cold chops, come off too tired to lift an eyelash — nothing but ringing and twisting and jumping and bumping. You ever have a couple of days off, can't overdo 'cause you go back to work feeling like the wreck of the Hesperus. People call me a 'good will ambassador' and that's very nice, but I never think too much about things like that.³³

At which point he drops the subject to embark upon another sentimental journey down memory lane to his early years growing up in New Orleans.

Armstrong's attachment to his childhood in New Orleans and the resentment that begins to surface at the life that he lived after leaving the city raises some interesting questions. Why would he attempt to return to these days so often over the course of his life and career? Why is it that he would consider his days of poverty, want, and hard labor more content, relaxed, and “happy” than the four decades of fame and fortune he experienced after he assimilated into—indeed, helped to create—the black culture industry? What I have been proposing is that by the time he landed in Beth Israel Hospital he was already running on a treadmill whose speed was on maximum overdrive. A lifetime of managing his emotions had left him conflicted as to the true state of his own. In front of him dangled a carrot in the form of an emotional resolution he claimed to possess but whose effect he needed to generate, sometimes, as he says, seven days a week for months on end. It was Armstrong's job to produce a panacea for the failures of a system whose inevitable effect was a feeling gap between political convictions and political realities, between longing and resolution, between voice and silence.

³¹ Meryman, “Interview.”

³² The list of songs in Armstrong's canon dedicated to the city is itself a testament to its real and symbolic importance: “Canal Street Blues,” “Zulu's Ball,” “New Orleans Stomp,” “West End Blues,” “Basin Street Blues,” “Mahogany Hall Stomp,” “Perdido Street Blues,” “Coal Cart Blues,” “Mississippi Basin,” “Back O' Town Blues,” “Do You Know What It Means To Miss New Orleans?,” “Where the Blues Were Born in New Orleans.” In fact, as a referent, aside from the eternal subject of love, no other topic rivals it for frequency.

³³ Meryman, “Interview.”

In public and private, Armstrong relished telling stories. He shared anecdotes about his life experiences and repeated them in countless forums. While there are multiple variations in many of the accounts of his childhood and adolescence, it is extremely hard to believe that he would have failed to bring up an episode as formative as the time he claimed to have spent with the Karnofskys in their home or to remember the details of his first encounter with the trumpet that brought him fame and financial security. Historians have been asking the wrong set of questions about Armstrong's Karnofsky document. I am not primarily concerned with assessing how the memoir might alter or reform the precise timeline of Armstrong's life, a project that quickly veers away from objectivity into fetishizing Armstrong, his work, and the legacy of the black experience. When we expand our consideration of the "why" of the memoir's production to include the problem of race at the intersection of labor, both physical *and* emotional, many of the disparate, fractured tropes within it—from his conflicting versions of how he first encountered the horn to when, precisely, he came to work for the Karnofsky family—begin to gain cohesion. Central to this effort is placing Armstrong's reflections on his childhood within the political context and cultural fallout of populist and Progressive Era New Orleans, something I believe biographers have not done sufficiently.

Abstract

This essay examines a controversial memoir Louis Armstrong wrote on his deathbed in New York's Beth Israel Hospital. I argue that critics have made the mistake of treating each of the narrative's elements as discrete units. In doing so they have protected the musician's legacy by detouring around many of the challenges the document poses to some deeply cherished ideas about Armstrong's life and the significance of his art. Cherry picking aspects of the narrative that reinforce his legacy as a social healer and purveyor of joy, they have reaffirmed his place as an exemplar of American exceptionalism. In order to make this claim they have left out, minimized or created apologetics for his many troubling mediations on the social conditions ordering turn of the century New Orleans. Instead of enriching our understanding of Armstrong, this has reproduced a sentimental analysis of his work. Using the prism of emotional labor I argue that the memoir primarily reflects the ideologies and mores of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era into which he was born. Critics have reinforced this by emphasizing the narrative's uplift mythos in place of a more complex, and problematic analysis of American racism, capitalist exploitation and political disfranchisement. Above all, the deathbed memoir attests to the lasting negative impact of structural changes in American society initiated at the turn of the century. In particular, I suggest that the narrative forces us to consider the re-imposition of black political and economic subordination in the wake of *Plessy v. Ferguson*. The document demands that we take seriously the consequences of the emotional and structural estrangement of black social life.