Chapter 6

Singing the Harlem Renaissance:
Langston Hughes, Translation, and
Diasporic Blues

The mood of the Blues is almost always despondency, but when they are sung, people laugh.
—Langston Hughes (1927)

In June 1932, “loaded down with bags, baggage, books, a typewriter, a victrola, and a big box of Louis Armstrong, Bessie Smith, Duke Ellington and Ethel Waters records,” the African American modernist poet, jazz and blues fan Langston Hughes embarked from New York on a trip that eventually took him across the Soviet Union, Central Asia, and, for one, maybe two nights, to Berlin, Germany.1 Already widely recognized as one of the most important poets of the New Negro modernist movement also known as the Harlem Renaissance, Hughes set sail with a small group to film “Black and White,” a Soviet-financed depiction of racism in the United States. On this journey, Berlin and with it Weimar Germany were but temporary stops and his first experience of the German capital was not a particularly positive one. About this “wretched city,” he later commented: “The pathos and poverty of Berlin’s low-priced market in bodies depressed me. As a seaman I had been in many ports and had spent a year in Paris working on Rue Pigalle, but I had not seen anywhere people so desperate as these walkers of the night streets in Berlin.”2 Yet it was also in Berlin that Hughes came to experience the African American presence in Germany. At the Haus Vaterland’s Turkish café, Hughes observed a Black waiter pouring coffee, whom he describes as a “Blackamoor in baggy velvet trousers, gold embroidered jacket and a red fez.”3 Assuming him to be African, none in his group attempted to speak to this foreigner in a foreign land, but when the waiter heard the group speaking English, he burst out: ““I’m sure
glad to see some of my folks!' [ . . . ] ‘Say, what’s doing on Lenox Avenue?’”

If Hughes relates no further information regarding who the waiter was or why he was in Germany, the presence of this Harlemite in Berlin can stand in for the current state of knowledge regarding the Weimar encounter with the Harlem Renaissance and its jazz poet laureate Langston Hughes: virtually unknown, often misrecognized, and yet there, waiting to speak.

Indeed, the German translation of Langston Hughes began in 1922, at a time when Hughes was but 21 years old, long before he became a dominant figure of African American poetry, and it continued almost unabated until 1933. Translators of the period were particularly attracted to his work—all told, there were seventeen different translators of his poetry into German, who produced more than sixty individual translations of his work. To be sure, these are not evenly distributed, neither chronologically nor geographically—most were published between 1929 and 1931 and had at least some connection to the Austrian capital, Vienna. Still, the poems, their translators, and the various modalities, personal, textual, and political, by which German-speaking authors came to engage with his work have much to say to us. They speak not only about the importance of Hughes and Harlem for Weimar culture but also about the need to develop new methodologies to account for cultural transfer and translation in the interwar period.

For one, the interpenetration of jazz, blues, and other forms of African American music in Hughes’ work shows how the impact of jazz, in America and Germany, was by no means limited to music alone. So if discussion of an African American poet would at first glance seem misplaced here, it is important to recall the broader categorization of jazz in the 1920s: as music, as dance, as drum, but also as art and culture. In other words, we would do well to heed Hughes’ claim in “To a Negro Jazz Band in a Parisian Cabaret”—that jazz has “seven languages to speak in / And then some.” More concretely, like no other artist associated with the Harlem Renaissance, Hughes embraced jazz and the blues in his work as a means of validating the originality and value of African American vernacular culture. As Brent Hayes Edwards writes of this poem: “The many languages in the poem are a means of apprehending a music so intimately concerned with dialogue and exchange among a group of performers and the audience that it can be approached only through a kind of critical multilingualism.” Indeed, German interest in jazz and interest in Hughes and the Harlem Renaissance reciprocally reinforced one another, regularly bleeding into each other through the translation of Hughes, “the original jazz poet.”

Tobias Nagl writes of the interest in jazz that it “was conceptualized in the best of circumstances as a means of communicating to Europe the political and
cultural emancipatory movements of the Black diaspora, the Harlem Renaissance, Pan-Africanism, and Civil Rights Movement." And yet a monolingualism nonetheless rules over current scholarly discussions of jazz in Germany, a mode of inquiry in which German jazz reception can only ever include reactions to jazz music, rather than the culture of jazz; its fans; and, as I argue here, its poetic language. Breaking out of this monolingualism, this chapter will attempt to learn how to speak one of jazz’s languages, that of African American modernist poetry.

For one, Hughes’ suggestion regarding the polyglot nature of jazz can be taken to also refer to the fact that jazz has always existed in multiple places and forms at the same time. Just as the famous jazz bands and African American revues of the period did not impact German cultural history alone, but rather the entire American and European continent, so too should it come as no surprise that the German translation of Langston Hughes weaves in and out of European national boundaries. Indeed, Hughes’ peripatetic life in many ways mirrors that of his translators, many of whom were of Jewish descent. Born to communities that after World War I had lost their prior national belonging or migrated to one of the major German-speaking metropolises like Berlin or Vienna, they often found themselves caught between national boundaries during the interwar period. More to the point, Hughes’ poetry and its call for self-recognition and empowerment resonated particularly powerfully with many German-language translators, be they Zionist, socialist, or otherwise affiliated.

Specifically, I want to suggest that in the German translations of Langston Hughes and other poets of the Harlem Renaissance, German-language writers of Jewish descent took part in what Edwards calls an act of diasporic reciprocity. “Reciprocity,” for Edwards, is less an originating appeal that is answered than a structure of mutual answerability: articulations of diaspora in tension and in dissonance, with necessary resolution or synthesis. [. . . ] Diaspora can be conceived only as the uneasy and unfinished practice of such dialogue—where each text both fulfills the demand of the other’s “call” and at the same time exposes its necessary “misrecognitions,” its particular distortions of the way race travels beyond the borders of nation and language.11

At the most basic level, the diasporic reciprocity of the Jewish and African diasporas is evidenced in the personal contact between Hughes and three such translators (Hans Goslar, Arthur Rundt, and Anna Nussbaum), even while such individual contact never meant that the translators or their translations were
without prejudices, of nation and language. That the diasporic reciprocity of the Jewish and African diasporas was both a point of contact as well as conflict is not particular to German-language translations of Hughes but is rather, as Edwards shows, the very definition of the practice of diaspora.

The most significant moment of diasporic reciprocity between Hughes and his Central European translators of Jewish descent occurred via the translators’ focus on the multivalent idea of voice. In this focus on the voice, Hughes’ translators repeatedly showed themselves to be exceptional. While much writing on jazz and African American culture shares a focus on the ineluctable rhythm of the jazz band, its saxophones and drums, Hughes’ translators instead tended to focus on the human voice and its expression in song. Voice should be understood here musically, but it is important to recognize how voice could be understood politically—as an agent of self-assertion in the face of constant oppression, as protest against pressure to assimilate, and, finally, as a call to value one’s origins. As one commentator, the Austrian writer Else Feldmann noted, these works of poetry showed how African Americans “are no longer dependent on someone white coming and ‘representing’ them. They, the ‘savages,’ sing their life themselves and they don’t sing it any less beautifully than the best whites.”

Yet if Hughes’ translators for the most part avoid direct reference to jazz, their work reveals a potentially even deeper engagement with jazz and the culture from which this music springs. So if it is often not jazz that dominates their work, then it is the culture and music standing behind jazz—what Hughes calls “that tune / That laughs and cries at the same time”—namely the blues. The blues are a foundational aesthetic of Hughes’ work, both in terms of form such as in his blues poems and also in terms of an overarching ethos of African American culture. This blues disposition of Hughes’ work is perhaps best expressed in the lyric: “When you see me laughing, I’m laughing just to keep from crying.” This combination of laughter and tears, comedy and tragedy was essential to Hughes’ deployment of the blues and jazz. Against a view of African American culture as one-dimensional, either comic or tragic, Hughes’ poetry works dialectically, imbuing the frenetic rhythms of the jazz band with tragedy and the languid despondence of the blues with comedy. This message was undoubtedly heard by his translators and their focus on voice and song invoked this dialectical sense of the blues not only implicitly but, as we shall see, quite explicitly. As the translation of the African into the Jewish diaspora, as an example of the sounding of repressed voices in Weimar culture, the significance of the translation of Langston Hughes into German is hard to overestimate. On the one hand, it opens up study of the African American diasporic
voice within Weimar culture by the revealing of the tragi-comic blues song behind the joyous dance of the jazz band. On the other hand, it offers a moment to theorize the relationship between African American and Jewish diasporic identities in the interwar period. In sum, the translation of Langston Hughes into German is a call to view in the exchange and contact between an African American modernist and his Central European Jewish interlocutors a complex and contradictory act of communication.

“Negro”: From Harlem to Berlin and the Rhine

In January 1922, *Crisis*, the main periodical of the NAACP published its third poem by Langston Hughes. Entitled “Negro,” it was to become one of Hughes’ most famous works and can today be found in almost all anthologies of his work. Hughes himself would shortly thereafter end his time as a student at Columbia University; meet Alain Locke and Countee Cullen; and eventually embark as a seaman for Europe, Paris, and the West African coast. In the meantime, he floundered financially, searching for a job in a city still very much closed to African American workers but embraced the culture of Harlem, its cabarets, and jazz. Then in April 1922, something curious happened. Hughes learned that one of his poems had appeared in a Berlin newspaper. Ironically, or better yet tellingly, Hughes’ poem had traversed the Atlantic before he had himself and long before he ever visited Berlin.

This first translator of Hughes’ work was Hans Goslar, at the time a senior civil servant within the Prussian government and later press secretary of the Prussian ministry of state. Born to a German-Jewish family in Hannover, Goslar was known at the time equally as Zionist and journalist. Through important, if controversial, works like *Die Sexualethik der jüdischen Wiedergeburt* (*The Sexual Ethics of Jewish Rebirth*) and *Jüdische Weltherrschaft! Phantasiegebilde oder Wirklichkeit?* (*Jewish Dominance of the World! Figment of Imagination or Reality?*), Goslar was a recognizable public figure within Berlin and a strong supporter of Weimar democracy. Arriving in New York on December 28, 1921, during his travels in America Goslar sent home articles about American life and then collected these in his travelogue *Amerika 1922*.

Goslar’s activities in the early 1920s are themselves indicative of the widespread interest in the United States by Weimar Germans. Many journalists and authors went to the United States in this period and returned home with strong impressions of this land of “unlimited possibilities” and, in the process, produced a staggering number of publications. Learning about and speaking
to African Americans was an important part of the travel itineraries of many visiting German writers. As the impact of the Great Migration became unmistakable in northern urban centers like New York, acquainting oneself with African American culture meant trips not only to the American South but, above all to the wondrously unique “black city” Harlem, as it was described in many contemporaneous accounts. Such interest may have peaked in the late 1920s, but, as Goslar’s early texts show, it was present from the very beginning and in dialogue with the early jazz enthusiasm of Siemsen and Tucholsky discussed in chapter 1. For example, the important journalist and theater critic Alfred Kerr undertook his own visit to New York in 1921. While there, he witnessed a major moment in the history of Black musical theater, Noble Sissle and Eubie Blake’s *Shuffle Along* at Daly’s 63rd Street theater. *Shuffle Along* was an important step not only in Josephine Baker’s career, who wowed German audiences in 1926, but also in Adelaide Hall’s, who performed with the *Chocolate Kiddies* in 1925. As Kerr presciently wrote of *Shuffle Along*, it “is at once striking . . . and inward. At once entertaining . . . and deeply felt — A symbol of the future?” Still, it was not only Goslar and Kerr who took note of Harlem, two further articles appeared in the *Vossische Zeitung* in 1922, discussing its Black millionaires and the new sense of racial empowerment expressed in movements like Garveyism. So while Goslar’s inclusion of Hughes may be the earliest known German translation of his work, its treatment of African American culture and the city of Harlem was by no means isolated or unique.

Like many other translations of Hughes into German, Goslar’s was not published as a stand-alone work of poetry. Instead, his setting of Hughes’ poem was embedded within a broader, journalistic account of African American culture and society, first within the April article “Der amerikanische Neger” (“The American Negro”) and then later within his travelogue. In his chapter “Afrika in U.S.A.,” an expanded version of the article from April, Goslar attempts to dispel any number of prejudices against African Americans, both those of Europeans and of white Americans. Though his tone tends towards paternalism, referring on more than one occasion to the childlike nature of African Americans, his argument is more historically than racially rooted. For him the fact that African American children tend to do well in early grades, only to falter in later ones, is “a given with a race that has not yet been intellectually trained, one unaccustomed to mental work.” Goslar further argues that differences between whites and Blacks in political, economic, and social matters are shrinking and that, for the most part, it is only a matter of time and opportunity before they disappear. He ends his section on the African American in the United States calling for “the complete emancipation of Negroes and the sys-
tematic education of this group of 11 million to morally full-fledged, socially and politically equal Americans.”

Goslar’s interest in the struggles of African Americans did not emerge from mere curiosity alone. As a German-Jewish Zionist, it was also personal and political. He takes note of a tendency within the African American community towards a self-understanding as belonging to a wider community of Africans living in diaspora. “Even if the great majority of American Negroes feel themselves thoroughly rooted within their home country and there do not remain many traditions of the homeland,” he suggests, “there nonetheless exists in many circles a general feeling that is not dissimilar to what is happening today under the name Zionism amongst the Jews of the world.” Both the growing Pan-African movement and the awakening of racial pride in the African American community following the war struck a chord with his own experiences as a German Jew.

In this, Goslar’s writings fit the mold of “Jewish traveling cultures” outlined by historian Nils Roemer. Looking at works by Arthur Holitscher, Joseph Roth, Egon Erwin Kisch, and others, Roemer traces the development of travel writing by Central European Jews to Eastern Europe, Palestine, America, and the Soviet Union as a “cultural practice that involved transcending cultural, political, and national boundaries.” While traveling necessarily involved reflection about differences between the foreign and the home, for German-speaking Jewish writers like Goslar, “traveling became more often a search than an experience of homecoming that testified not only to a great deal of curiosity but betrayed a profound sense of not feeling at home at home.” In other words, Goslar’s notes about African American cultural strivings can also be read as a reflection of the lack of acceptance he would have to face when he returned home. Given the June 1922 murder of Walther Rathenau, the German-Jewish industrialist and presiding foreign minister, it was a struggle that remained all too present for German-Jewish writers like Goslar.

Yet if the connection drawn by Goslar between Zionism and the Harlem Renaissance was one typical concern of the translators, so too was the framework by which he sought to understand Hughes’ work: music and voice. Unlike so much of the early jazz discussion, which focused almost exclusively on rhythm, Goslar frames his account of African American musical achievement via the voice. It is thus not only as a poetic work of art but also as a “little song” that he offers his “loose translation” of Hughes’ poem “Negro.” Tellingly, though many changes to sentence structure and wording are present throughout the translation, it is the fourth stanza on music that Goslar most radically alters. Compare Hughes’ words on the left to Goslar’s translation on the right.
I’ve been a singer:       Aber immer hab’ ich gesungen,
All the way from Africa to
Georgia I carried my sorrow
songs.          Auf dem Wege von Afrika nach
               Georgia ertönten meine
               traurigen Lieder.
I made ragtime.29         Und dabei tanzte ich im
               Rhythmus.30

Curiously, the translation gives music an almost greater power than it holds in
the source text. The addition of “aber immer” (“but always”) to the opening
line marks the musical voice as a continuing source of resistance to the oppres-
sion that surrounds it. Goslar’s gloss on the musical genre of ragtime, “Und
dabei tanzte ich im Rhythmus” (“and I danced around to the beat”), is equally
telling because it is less a future point in the development of African American
song than an act taking place in parallel.

For a variety of reasons, I want to argue that Goslar’s setting of Hughes’
“Noegro” follows what translation theorist Lawrence Venuti has called a domes-
ticating, rather than foreignizing, method of translation. Following Friedrich
Schleiermacher, Venuti distinguishes between “a domesticating method, an
ethnocentric reduction of the foreign text to target-language cultural values,
bringing the author back home, and a foreignizing method, an ethnode
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31 pressure on those values to register the linguistic and cultural difference of the
foreign text, sending the reader abroad.” Most striking in this regard about
Goslar’s translation is that while each stanza of Hughes’ poem begins with “I”
or “I’ve,” the German translation does not once begin a line with the equiva-
lent, transforming, for example, the first line “I am a Negro” into “Ein Neger
bin ich” (“A Negro am I”). Later translators like Anna Nussbaum will not
follow him in rigid adherence to German stylistic rules; and with good reason.
Though Hughes’ original poem structures the identity of the lyric “I” through
its copula with “Negro,” this equation is part of a complicated enunciation of
African American identity that takes place in and against a temporal element.
In Goslar’s rendition, however, the individuality of the poem’s lyrical subject
is diminished through this series of inversions that, when taken together, act to
place an ahistorical racial identity over individual, historical subjectivity.
While this is in tune with Goslar’s use of the poem as a demonstration of the
feeling of solidarity with Africa, of Pan-Africanism qua Zionism, this abstract
framing of the Black subject will take on a different tone when the political
stakes of the context shifted from the left to the right.

Attesting to the broadening interest in African American culture that al-
ready existed in the early 1920s, Goslar’s Zionist reading of Hughes was to be
ripped out of its context and inserted into a proto-fascist critique of the French occupation of the Rhineland in Georg Widenbauer’s “Die schwarze Weltgefahr” (“The Black Threat to the World”) from 1923. As discussed in chapter 1, the French occupation of the Rhine, which began in 1919 and continued until 1930, involved some 80,000 soldiers in total, of which between 30,000 and 40,000 were African. It will further be remembered that the debate was marked by a vitriolic comingling of racial, national, and sexual metaphors, leading to discussion of the occupation as a violation and defilement of the nation. In “The Black World Danger,” Widenbauer sees in the occupation more than German suffering at the hand of Blacks. He argues instead that it marks but the first stage in a worldwide revolt of non-whites against whites. “By itself,” he writes, “the Black Horror encompasses only a part of the horror facing the entirety of white humanity, should the black race awaken.”33 For Widenbauer, the African American is the pivotal figure in this awakening of the Black race as he is representative of not one but two victors of the war: American modernity and non-white races.

It is into this racial phantasmagoria of globalized Black rebellion that Widenbauer plunges Goslar’s translation of Hughes, though, significantly, without attributing the translation to the Jewish Goslar. At the same time, Widenbauer’s text, like Goslar’s, contains surprising moments of identification with Hughes and African Americans. As he writes to introduce the poem: “We understand the deep melancholy that speaks from the sorrow song of the American Negro Langston Hughes.”34 Just as Goslar had set up a parallel between Jews and African Americans, Widenbauer implicitly places the white German and the African American on equal footing, as both are, at least to him, victims of the victors. Commenting on Hughes’ poem, he writes: “This sorrow song of blacks breathes life not only from an insatiable longing for the motherland Africa. Alongside this homesickness there resounds in the soul of the black resentment (Groll) over his previous oppression as well. From this, he creates the indestructible hope of throwing off his yoke of oppression.”35 Were one to replace in this passage “Black” with “German” and “Africa” with “Germany,” it could very well describe the revanchist sentiment of right-wing radicals regarding the occupation and loss of eastern territories after the Treaty of Versailles.

At the same time, Widenbauer’s argument as a whole and the presence of Hughes in particular act to reestablish distance between white Europe, Black Africa, and a racially suspect America. Again revealing the crucial role played by music within Hughes’ German-language reception, though Widenbauer makes but two changes to Goslar’s translation, they both occur in the
fourth stanza on music. First, he Germanizes the proper name “Georgia,” which Goslar and later Nussbaum retained. By turning “Georgia” into “Georgien,” he thereby furthers Goslar’s domesticating strategy and replaces a clearly American location with one that also carries connotations on the European continent. More significantly, Widenbauer removes the point of origin, Africa, from line 11, which now begins “Auf dem Wege nach Georgien” (“On the way to Georgia”) rather than “All the way from Africa to Georgia.” Through this deletion, Widenbauer’s translation abstracts Black musical culture from any specific historical context. Hughes’ poem had insisted that African musical traditions have not only been preserved in spite of the arduous journey wrought by the Atlantic slave trade but have developed (from sorrow song to ragtime) and become historical. In sum, Widenbauer’s subtle alterations act to figure the African American as a dancing “Negro” from nowhere, always on a journey, always the same, and always marching in a foreign land a la Germany’s Rhineland.

“I, Too”: Of German Mimicry and African American Originality

In the mid-1920s, travel to New York, and by extension also to Harlem, continued. This led to a number of further cases of Hughes appearing in the German press in both translated and untranslated form. The most significant examples of the translation and transmission of Hughes in the mid-1920s derive from Arthur Rundt, a German-Jewish journalist born in Katowice, today in Poland, but at the time part of the disputed territory of Upper Silesia. Rundt himself was an especially mobile figure, spending much of the early twentieth century in Vienna before finally emigrating to New York where he passed away in 1939. His life and works exist between and beyond Germany and Austria, an element characteristic of many of Hughes’ translators. It was in 1924/25 that he undertook his first trips to New York, arriving on April 20, 1924, and then returning on January 17, 1925. During this period and afterward, Rundt wrote extensively for German-language newspapers and journals between Berlin and Vienna on issues related to America. More importantly, it was through his travels and writings that he came personally to know Alain Locke and Langston Hughes. Between 1927 and 1929, Rundt corresponded and met with Locke, in both New York and Washington, D.C., where Locke was a professor at Howard University. Sending his greetings to Hughes in one of his letters to Locke, Rundt also seems to have met
Hughes personally on at least one occasion. 39 Yet while in New York, Rundt not only met with African Americans but gave a lecture at the New York Labor Temple based upon his recent trip to Palestine. 40 As such, one can count Rundt as well as belonging to Roemer’s “Jewish traveling cultures,” whose third main destination, the Soviet Union, Rundt also visited. 41 Finally, note should also be made here of Rundt’s attempt to publish a German edition of Locke’s seminal anthology The New Negro: An Interpretation with one of the most important German publishers of the period, the S. Fischer Verlag. Though this project did not come to fruition, Rundt’s personal contact with Locke and his attempt to publish a translation of this central work of the Harlem Renaissance yet again show how German knowledge and engagement with African American culture were rarely produced within a vacuum. 42

Unlike Goslar or Widenbauer, Rundt generally portrays African Americans not in terms of their difference from the American mainstream but in their similarity to it. Harlem may excite him as “a complete, enclosed social machinery . . . , a black city,” 43 yet it is not the city’s Blackness, but its American-ness, ultimately meaning its whiteness, that fascinates him. Rundt’s interpretation of African American culture is that it is fundamentally determined by a need to mimic and recreate white culture. As he writes: “Over and over again there sounds in the speaking and writing of the Negro this passionate cry of blood: for sameness (Gleichsein).” 44 “Sameness” for Rundt oscillates between demands for political and social equality and a racially rooted drive towards cultural assimilation. Yet while Rundt does retain the idea of “blood” race as an ultimate marker of difference, the assimilation of African Americans to (white) American culture is part of his general interpretation of American culture as the result of racial contact and hybridization. As Dorothea Lübbermann writes, “The culture of modernism (Moderne) in which creative people come into contact with each other and with their audience is for Rundt the result of a racial mixture to which African Americans have made decisive contributions.” 45

In total, Rundt translated five pieces of African American poetry and published them, along with numerous references to Hughes’ work in periodicals and newspapers in Prague, Vienna, Berlin, and Frankfurt. 46 Yet, it is his translation of “I, Too” that is most deserving of mention. 47 Again highlighting the speed with which Hughes’ poetry was translated into German—while “I, Too” debuted in America in March 1925, it was already being read in Rundt’s German translation in May of that very same year. More importantly, Rundt uses his translation of “I, Too” as the lynchpin of his interpretation of African Americans as mimetic. Indeed, he employs the English title “I, Too” as a leitmotif throughout these writings. For example, in his article “Die schwarze Welle”
(“The Black Wave”), Rundt constructs a parallel between the concept of mimicry and Hughes’ title, writing: “I, too! I, too! Mimicry! Mimicry.” While in his travelogue Amerika ist anders (America Is Different), he glosses the title by writing: “‘I too! I too!’—‘I also want to be like that! I too.’” In yet a third context, he notes: “The ‘I too’ of the American Negro, the call for sameness (Gleich-Sein), the will to mimicry is most clearly present in the New York Negro quarter Harlem.” In point of fact, it is hard not to suspect that for Rundt, the “too” of Hughes’ title was also to be understood as its English homophone “two,” in which the African American “I” is but a doppelgänger of the white American.

Accordingly, Rundt’s translation of the poem revolves around and resolves into mirrored pairs. Though slight variations exist between the published versions of his translation, in all, he adds the words “I, too” to the end of the first line of the poem and consistently punctuates this new sentence with an exclamation mark. Rundt also adds an exclamation point to Hughes’ line 13. These additions may make the poem seem more overtly political, but in their repetitiveness, these screams also read as childishly impertinent. In a more substantive manner, he achieves this mirroring effect through alterations to the structure and language of the second stanza of “I, too.” These become especially clear when Rundt’s translation is compared with Hughes’ source text.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tomorrow,</th>
<th>Morgen</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I’ll be at the table</td>
<td>Will ich bei Tische sitzen,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When company comes.</td>
<td>Wenn Gäste kommen.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nobody’ll dare</td>
<td>Morgen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Say to me,</td>
<td>Wird niemand sich trau’n,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Eat in the kitchen,”</td>
<td>Zu mir zu sagen:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Then.</td>
<td>“Iß in der Küche!”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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It should further be noted that Hughes’ original second stanza is bookended by the temporal modifiers “tomorrow” and “then.” These are certainly parallel but not identical. The concluding “then” exists as a part of a series, an embedded moment that follows on the past but occurring at an uncertain, i.e., historically dependent, point in the future. Rundt’s restructuring removes this carefully composed temporality by translating the indeterminate “then” with a repetition of “tomorrow” and moving it to the middle of the stanza. In this way, Rundt’s translation undercuts the development implied within the poem, just as Widenbauer and to a lesser extent Goslar had done in the stanza on music from “Ne-
“The Negro Speaks of Rivers”: Cultural Flow between African Americans and German-Speaking Europe

By the time Langston Hughes first heard from Anna Nussbaum in late 1927, he was well aware of the interest in his work in the German-speaking world. At the same time, Nussbaum quickly eclipsed all others, both in the number, quality, and impact of her translations. Through the publication of Afrika singt. Eine Auslese neuer afro-amerikanischer Lyrik (Africa Sings: A Selection of Recent Afro-American Poetry), she was responsible for the publication of almost forty translations of his poetry and around one hundred translations of contemporary African American poets. Born in Eastern Galicia in 1877, the Austrian-Jewish Nussbaum moved sometime in her childhood to Vienna. First attending university in Switzerland, she eventually received her doctorate from the University of Vienna in 1907. Following the war, her activities focused on two areas, translation and journalism. To begin with, during the first half of the 1920s, she was active as a translator of French authors, translating the works of Rousseau and Rabelais, as well as Henri Barbusse. She also took great interest in American authors and, in 1929, published a translation of Theodore Dreiser’s novel Sister Carrie. Nussbaum additionally worked as a journalist for a number of Viennese newspapers, first for Die Neue Freie Presse and then more consistently for Der Tag. She was further engaged in socialist and feminist or-
ganizations like the *Internationale Frauenliga für Frieden und Freiheit*. This combination of journalism and activism, according to historian Lisa Silver-
man, was typical of Vienna’s Jewish community: “In an era when a filiative identification with Judaism declined, many Jews felt the pull of more affiliative cultural networks such as journalism and socialist organizations.” In the case of Nussbaum, one such affiliative network became the Harlem Renaissance.

Already in 1922, the same year as Goslar’s visit to New York, she had taken note of African American culture, jazz music, and spirituals. In an article appearing in the *Sozialistische Monatshefte*, Nussbaum reviewed three works in French by or about members of the African diaspora. Discussing novels by Paul Reboux, Rene Maran, and Lucie Cousturier, she demands greater realism within fictional portrayals of Africans. In the present context, however, it is the short note at the end of her article that will prove most germane to her future activities as translator of Hughes. There, she writes with passion about a personal experience with African American music:

> Recently I had the opportunity to get to know the exceptional musical and rhythmic talents of Negroes, their fine feeling for humor and parody. For some time, they’ve been playing, dancing, and singing at the Prater. Of course, they’ve done so according to the demands of the public, above all the frenetic vitality of jazz band melodies, but at personal request they’ll also sing their wondrous, old nigger songs, in which a centuries-old longing for freedom, a heartfelt, intimate (*rührend-innig*) love of home is expressed. May the best amongst the whites finally find the courage of conviction to raise their voice for justice and understanding for a race that like everyone has a right to pursue, according to its individuality (*Eigenheit*), a beneficent development in its own, free country.

Here in its earliest form is Nussbaum’s ambiguous understanding of African American culture, in which received tropes of African American culture are interwoven with unique insight. On the one hand, she repeats the idea of a rhythmically and musically superior Black subject, so often present in European appraisals of jazz music, not to mention her use of racially insensitive vocabulary. On the other hand, she senses that what African American performers offer to the public is not always a true reflection of their own culture but rather a show for the public. Furthermore, she recognizes the necessity of Africans and African Americans to develop their own culture without European and/or American domination, echoing, if only faintly, Goslar’s reading of Pan-Africanism via Zionism.
The performers to which she was responding are as important as what Nussbaum has to say, however. Nussbaum’s comments were written in response to the performances of the Southern Syncopated Orchestra (SSO) in Vienna, which took place at the Prater between May and September 1922 and featured many of the most famous African American artists of the period, jazz and otherwise. Aside from Sidney Bechet, Buddy Gilmore, and the composer Will Marion Cook, one must also make note of singer Abbie Mitchell, first mentioned here in the discussion of the Chocolate Kiddies. In a curious twist of fate, Mitchell will cross paths with Nussbaum via her translation work once more. In 1931, Mitchell will give concert performances in America of Nussbaum’s German translations of Langston Hughes. Given Mitchell’s performance of these songs and her involvement in the prehistory of the Chocolate Kiddies, it is thus fitting that the likely impetus for Nussbaum’s process of discovery began with an encounter with the SSO and Abbie Mitchell.58

Between Nussbaum’s experience of the SSO and the beginning of her writings on African American music and translation of Harlem Renaissance poetry, five years elapsed. There were numerous modalities through which Nussbaum might have come into contact with African American performers and artists, jazz and otherwise, in these intervening years.59 Still, the exact details of how her interest spread from the experience in the Prater to the translation of African American modernist poetry remain unknown. What is known is that from late 1927 onward, she took a great interest in this subject, beginning with an article in September of that year. Entitled “Neger-Musik” (“Negro Music”), the immediate occasion for this was an upcoming performance of the Utica Jubilee Singers, one of the African American vocal groups that regularly toured European metropolises in the 1920s.60 In this piece, she discusses the history of ragtime and jazz, as well as African American spirituals via collections by Stephen Foster, James Weldon Johnson, and J. Rosamond Johnson, and presents information about figures such as Ira Aldridge, George Bridgetower, Sissieretta Jones, Roland Hayes, and Paul Robeson. Just three months later, Nussbaum began writing about and to African American modernists like Hughes. In her first letter to Hughes from December 7, 1927, she introduces herself, asks permission to publish translations of his work, and, because a young composer is interested in setting his poems to music, for an example of the blues.61 On December 25, she then publishes a short article on Hughes’ life, his thought, and his poetry in the Vienna newspaper Der Tag, calling him “a poet of the colored proletariat, of the proletariat as such,” closing the article with two translations of Hughes’ work, “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” and “Porter.”62 As she had with her other cor-
respondents, she sent a copy of this article to Hughes himself, something, which as we’ve seen, Frankfurt jazz fan Dietrich Schulz-Köhn would also do some thirty years later.

The intellectual and material exchange between Nussbaum and African American modernists that took place between 1927 and her untimely death in 1931 produced a flood of translations and publications out of the trickle that had come before. For Hughes was but the first of many African Americans that she reached out to: W. E. B. Du Bois, Countee Cullen, Claude McKay, George Schuyler, and Georgia Douglas Johnson can all be counted amongst her correspondents. Though unlike Goslar and Rundt, she never travelled to America or Harlem, Nussbaum’s words and thoughts traversed the Atlantic many times through her prodigious letter writing. Her contact with Du Bois proved especially useful, as through him she was able to contact other figures and acquire a subscription to the *Crisis*, as well as access important works by African American authors. Indeed, she profited so much from this exchange that Hughes and her other African American correspondents can be said to have shaped her anthology *Africa Sings*. To begin with, her interlocutors supplied Nussbaum with works to which she would otherwise have had no access. Before she began corresponding with Hughes in late 1927, Nussbaum seems to have possessed Hughes’ *Weary Blues* and his *Fine Clothes to the Jew*, as well as Locke’s *The New Negro*. Yet by the time the anthology was published, it contained works from ten separate poetry collections as well as poems from the journals the *Crisis*, *Opportunity*, and *Carolina Magazine*. In other words, it was only after Nussbaum began corresponding with Hughes that the breadth and variety of texts and authors began to take shape, and it is this element more than any other that makes *Africa Sings* so unique.

As was the case with her initial correspondence with Hughes, Nussbaum not only received texts from African American authors, she returned her own works to them. With her letters to Hughes, Du Bois, or Cullen, she included press clippings from the German and Austrian press discussing or defending African American culture. Writing in the *Pittsburgh Courier*, George Schuyler relays that she contacted him in 1928 asking for facts and materials related to African American life. He responded by giving her photographs of African Americans from a variety of professional backgrounds as well as further addresses. When a racially motivated campaign emerged in Vienna to protest a planned performance by Josephine Baker, Nussbaum had the materials and knowledge to intervene. She quickly published an article in *Der Tag*, “Die afro-amerikanische Frau” (“The Afro-American Woman”), presenting in both textual and pictorial form a diverse image of Black women in the arts, education,
entertainment, and politics.66 As Schuyler, who received a copy of the article, noted: “With the information obtained from this side of the water, Dr. Nussbaum has written several articles on the Negro which appeared in leading Austrian and German newspapers. She has made the public in those two countries familiar with artistic development among Negroes along all lines. Thousands of people over there are now aware of the poetry of Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, and Arna Bontemps.”67

Indeed, transfer between Nussbaum and the Harlem Renaissance was in at least one case reciprocal. Nussbaum’s “The Afro-American Woman” was itself translated and appeared, likely via Du Bois’ help, in the Norfolk Journal and Guide, an important African American periodical.68 Comparison between the translation found in Du Bois’ papers, likely Nussbaum’s work, and the published version reveals key differences and points towards conflicts over the representation of African American culture between German-speakers like Nussbaum and African Americans themselves. For one, while Nussbaum translates her original reference to the “einfache Verse” of Phillis Wheatley as “simple verses,” the published version takes instead “plain verse,” a selection that shifts the meaning of “einfach” from uncomplicated to unadorned. Further, while Nussbaum writes in reference to African American perseverance in the face of racism and violence that “Der Geist läßt sich nicht morden” (“One cannot murder the spirit.”), the published English version reads: “His [the African American] spirit won’t allow him to perish.”69 Localizing Nussbaum’s universal claim written from a socialist and Jewish diasporic perspective, the English translation refocuses the energies of the piece towards the more immediate political ends of African Americans. As this and the preceding examples demonstrate, Anna Nussbaum and Africa Sings reveal not a one-sided German-Austrian interest, but cooperation, collaboration, and an example of diasporic reciprocity with diverse African American artists and intellectuals like Schuyler, Du Bois, and Hughes.

The collaborative quality of Nussbaum’s work on Africa Sings was furthered through the participation of three other translators. In addition to Nussbaum, Anna Siemsen (sister of early jazz commentator Hans Siemsen), Josef Luitpold Stern, and Hermann Kesser each contributed translations and each of them had their own views on African American culture and poetry. This resulted in many of the translations engaging in domesticating strategies reminiscent of those analyzed in Goslar and Rundt.70 Yet Nussbaum’s own translations, all poems by Hughes, are marked by Venuti’s strategy of foreignization. Consider, for example, her translation of Hughes’ fourth stanza on music from “Negro,” in particular in relation to Goslar’s (see above).
I’ve been a singer:
All the way from Africa to
Georgia
I carried my sorrow songs.
I made ragtime.71

Sänger war ich:
Weit her von Afrika nach Georgia
Brachte ich meine Leidgesänge.
Ich habe Ragtime geschaffen.72

In wording, structure, even punctuation, Nussbaum models her translation on the source text, retaining, for example, the proper names “Georgia” and “Ragtime,” rather than replacing them with German equivalents as had Goslar and Widenbauer and as would later translators Hannah Meuter and Paul Therstappen.73 Further, her early use of the term “afro-amerikanisch” (“Afro-American”) in the collection’s subtitle is yet another indication of the foreignizing tendency of her translation strategy. Such remnants of the source text demand that the reader understand the poet Hughes as much on his own terms as on the terms of the language into which he has been translated. To speak with Venuti, Nussbaum’s translation sends the reader abroad, rather than back home.

The reasoning behind such, albeit relative, fidelity is laid out in Nussbaum’s preface to Africa Sings. She begins by justifying the peculiar title. Following Alain Locke, Nussbaum defines such poems not as “Negro poetry,” but as “Afro-American poetry: songs of Negroes living in America that are first and foremost rooted in race feeling, in solidarity with Africa.”74 This “race feeling” is not the triumph of biology over individuality, but, as she explains, “a thoroughly noble feeling grounded in the human experience (im menschlichen Gemüt).”75 It is a feeling that is both aesthetically productive and a means of aiding, rather than inhibiting, understanding between cultures and peoples. In addition, if the title’s reference to Africa would seem to emphasize the past rather than present of African Americans, it is important to point out that Nussbaum’s anthology contains only works produced in the contemporary, i.e., the 1920s, and the timeliness of the poems works dialectically with the title’s African framing, allowing the works to be understood in a modern, political, and historical context.

This dialectical movement linking past and present is further expressed in the anthology’s ten thematic divisions. These are “I am a Negro,” “The White God,” “The New Homeland,” “Work,” “You Whites,” “The Black Woman,” “Harlem,” “Poet’s Dream,” “Love,” “Liberation,” and “In Folk Sound (Blues) (Im Volkston [Blues]).” These divisions can and should be read chronologically, but it is neither a timeless nor a reductive history. Instead, they document the re-articulation of African American history by the poets themselves, in which progress is marked both by a growing independence from white culture
as well as by the development of racial pride. So while the beginning four sections focus on the legacy of slavery and dislocation, beginning with the seventh section on Harlem, there is a shift towards issues facing African Americans in their own community. For example, the poems collected under the heading “Liberation” are not about liberation from physical, but rather the mental and spiritual, bondage of pervasive racism and racial oppression. It is this logic that justifies the anthology’s closing with Hughes’ blues poems. For Nussbaum, these blues have been “invigorated” by Hughes “with a new spirit and timeliness” and reveal the soul of his people in a way that is free from the deformities of white representations of Blackness. Despite these major differences from other translators, Nussbaum’s conception of African American culture and many of the individual translations themselves remain to a large degree informed by European and German cultural notions of African vitality, musicality, and naïveté. Their difference lies in the fact that unlike other translations these were to no small degree counteracted through her direct contact and exchange with the African American artists themselves.

Further, if translations like those of Goslar and Rundt were scattered throughout the press, appearing at irregular intervals, Africa Sings’ status as an anthology containing around one hundred translations quantitatively and qualitatively altered the German-language encounter with Hughes. What makes the anthology noteworthy, then, is not simply Nussbaum’s personal contact with figures like Hughes and Du Bois, but the amount of publications it inspired about African American poetry and its translation into German, and their importance abroad and at home. Indeed, the work’s cultural resonance upon publication was striking. For one, Africa Sings was widely and positively reviewed, receiving discussion in the German, Austrian, and even American press. In Crisis, African American chemist Percy Julian, who had studied at the University of Vienna, wrote that Africa Sings “marked a new epoch in European effort at interpretation of American Negro Youth.” Of the impact of the work on the broader public sphere, he notes: “in 1930 one found a copy of ‘Afrika Singt’ on the bookshelf of nearly every cultured German home.” If this is surely an exaggeration, partial confirmation comes from the unlikely source of novelist Hermann Hesse, author of his own jazz-influenced novel, Der Steppenwolf from 1927. Indicative of the type of informal circulation amongst left-leaning artists and intellectuals likely to have been prevalent at the time, Hesse writes:

Recently while travelling I found a book lying in the guest room of a friend in Munich. For three nights I read in it with excitement and great interest. It is called Africa Sings and contains a selection of Negro poetry,
not from Africa, but America, that were translated into German by various translators. I will buy this book, it captivated me. Ancient things sound there in a new key and move the heart.80

If someone like Hesse could come across the work in the guest room of Reinhold Geheeb, editor of the journal *Simplicissimus*, others need not have known such literary luminaries or have left their exposure to mere serendipity. For there were three further means by which *Africa Sings* came to exert its influence on the German and Austrian public sphere.

The first of these occurred through the republication of the poems in a variety of journals and newspapers. In the many reviews of the work, the miniature form of the poem proved particularly advantageous to spreading Hughes’ name, with examples of his poetry and the poetry of others easily reprinted. Between 1929 and 1933, *Africa Sings*’ translations of Langston Hughes appear in at least nine further publications in Germany and Austria.81 This also included the reproduction of Nussbaum’s translation of “Negro” in Alfons Goldschmidt’s 1931 pamphlet in support of the Scottsboro Boys 8 Menschen in der Todeszelle (8 People on Death Row).82 This global movement to free a group of African American youths who had been falsely imprisoned and convicted of rape in 1931 had a surprisingly broad impact in Germany, as we shall see in the next chapter. Beyond such republications, *Africa Sings* also spurred others on to translate Hughes, producing a total of seven further translations. In the socialist journal *Urania*, Anna Siemsen, co-translator with Nussbaum, introduced four new translations by “comrade Kurgass,” likely Paula Kurgass, noted feminist and later German-Jewish exile.83 Then there is the case of Thomas Otto Brandt. During the 1920s, Brandt was part of a group of young Austrian writers involved with a short-lived journal *Literarische Monatshefte*, in which two new translations of Hughes appeared.84 Though the readership for this journal was extremely small, these poems later made their way across the Atlantic to the pages of *Crisis* where Percy Julian reproduced them for his African American readership. Finally, *Africa Sings* gave speakers of German outside of Germany, Austria, and Switzerland access to Hughes’ poetry, and Slovene translations of Hughes, based not on the originals, but upon the translations in *Africa Sings*, were published in the early 1930s.85 Such reprintings and new translations, within and outside of Weimar Germany, not only magnified the effect of *Africa Sings*, they stand as an index of a broad European and German-speaking interest in African American culture and modernism. Like ripples in the water, the translations of *Africa Sings* spread out from Vienna and Germany throughout Central Europe and then back to the United States, com-
pleting the cycle begun by Goslar’s first translation and the letter back to Hughes in 1922.

Still, perhaps the most lasting way Nussbaum’s translation work moved beyond the containment of the poetry anthology was through music, in particular through song. Between 1929 and 1931, no less than eight composers set the poems of *Africa Sings* to music: Helmut Bornefeld, Wilhelm Grosz, Werner Richard Heymann, Fritz Kramer, Edmund Nick, Kurt Pahlen, Eric Zeisl, and Alexander Zemlinsky (figure 14). Further, Ossip Dymow and Béla Reinitz produced an operetta, *Schatten über Harlem* (*Shadows over Harlem*) with songs based on poems from *Africa Sings*. Named after McKay’s 1922 poem and anthology of the same name, this important work will be discussed below. Still, working only from the uneven translations of *Africa Sings*, these young composers often found themselves in a difficult position. Even if in such imperfect form, their musical interpretations of Hughes’ work soon found their way onto German, Polish, and Czech airwaves. Both Pahlen (1930) and Zemlinsky (1935) had their works debuted on *Radio Brünn* and, in an unlikely squaring of the circle, Grosz’s *Afrika Songs* premiered in February 1930 on the *Schlesische Funkstunde* simultaneously broadcast to Berlin, Leipzig, and Cologne under the musical direction of Edmund Nick, himself author of a composition inspired by *Africa Sings*. Importantly, the reach of Nussbaum’s translations and their musical settings was not limited to Europe alone. As referenced above, between the spring and fall of 1931, the African American singer Abbie Mitchell, whom Nussbaum had first seen in Vienna in 1922, gave a series of concerts in Chicago and New York in which she performed songs from Pahlen’s settings. Like the translation of Nussbaum’s “The Afro-American Woman” and Brandt’s poetry, Hughes’ poetry, transposed into music and translated into German, went back across the Atlantic where it was heard anew.

Through these reprintings, new translations, musical productions, and national radio programs, the poems of *Africa Sings* reached a German- and non-German-speaking audience outside, but also inside, Weimar Germany. Through the constant endeavors of Nussbaum, but also the actions of others like Kur-gass, Brandt, Bornefeld, Goldschmidt, and Mitchell, *Africa Sings* was elevated beyond the isolated endeavor of one exceptional woman in Vienna. In giving access to Hughes’ poetry and providing a focus to such energies, *Africa Sings* and Anna Nussbaum were able to bring to surface a subterranean flow of interest. Of course, when such interest surfaced, it could also provoke, and the history of Ossip Dymow and Bela Reinitz’s *Shadows over Harlem* is a prime example of the tragic (and comic) fate of Langston Hughes in German translation.
Weimar Gets the Blues:
New Negro Culture Meets Nazi Politics

In the early evening of October 19, 1930, a group of brown shirts lingers in a park to the north of Stuttgart’s city center on a plane tree path. They gather in preparation of *Shadows over Harlem*, a musical comedy that at 7:30 that evening will have its premiere at the *Kleines Theater*. With a Jewish author and African American culture as its subject, to them, the piece is a prime example of the cultural bolshevism seemingly so prevalent in Weimar Germany and an affront to the German nation and race. They are, however, not the only group on alert that evening. Having become aware of the Nazis’ intentions, the Stuttgart police has increased their forces in the area and taken measures to block the way leading from the theater to the nearby state parliament. Should things get out of hand, they have two extra squadrons standing at the ready. Both groups will play their role tonight.
Regrettably, for the Nazis at least, the play has first to be performed before it can be protested. To this end, a group of them enters the theater, where they intend to disrupt the performance. Yet because this is a premiere and no one is aware of the particularities of the piece, the group must lie in wait for an offending scene or utterance. In fact, the first act will proceed relatively quietly, with only a single whistle of disgust issuing from the audience. The second act will not proceed so smoothly. During a salacious song-and-dance scene, the youths finally take sufficient offense and seize the moment to halt the performance (figure 15). As Karl Konrad Düssel described the scene in the *Stuttgarter Neues Tagblatt*: “It is a scene played with virtuosity. Both characters, the acting, the songs, the dances, everything magnificent [. . .] But it is a rather direct scene. An extremely unseemly scene, the protesters must have said to themselves. And now there’s no more restraint. Now it breaks loose. Whistling, noise, yelling. ‘Filth’ is the least one hears.”96 Some audience members decide to protest the protesters and cries to play on compete with the chants of the Nazis.97 The house lights are turned on, restoring order and weakening the protest, but as soon as the room is once again darkened, the shouting match begins anew. This process repeats itself, until, after a delay lasting several minutes, the scene can finally be completed. Despite further incidences, though none as memorable, the play eventually reaches its finale, after which, with author and cast standing on stage, another battle of wills, hands, and voices takes place between the Nazi scandalizers and members of the audience supportive of the piece. Yet the scandal has by no means reached its climax. Departing audience members are met outside by the group of young men from the park. Here, the theatergoers will endure, amongst other insults, repeated chants of “Deutschland erwache. Juda verrecke” (Germany awake. Die Jew) lasting for around thirty minutes. Eventually, the police enter with their reserves and forcefully clear the area with nightsticks, arresting many of the protesters and finally restoring order.

*Shadows over Harlem* will have only two more performances, after which it will be permanently cancelled. The official reason given is the failing health of Emil Heß, Toomer from the offending scene, but neither its proponents nor opponents put much stock into that explanation. Instead, the cancellation of the play, alongside the scandal of its premiere, stood as a sign of the increasing power of the National Socialist movement, in particular as the scandal occurred directly on the heels of the Nazis’ breakthrough performance in the September 1930 elections. Bolstered by the Nazis’ success in disrupting and then removing the play from the theater, local right-wing politician Franz Mergenthaler gave a speech in the state parliament calling for a review of the the-
Figure 15: Scene from Ossip Dymow’s *Schatten über Harlem* in Stuttgart, 1930. Staatsarchiv Ludwigsburg of the Landesarchiv Baden-Württemberg.
ater’s funding and leadership. In a related incident, Stuttgart’s Nazi leadership threatened to send all 21,000 of their supporters to the theater should the play ever be performed again.98 Like the counter-protesters in the theater, the liberal press, local and national, defended, if not the piece itself, then the theater’s and Dymow’s right to free expression.99 The socialist press as well criticized the Nazis’ actions and was generally more sympathetic to intentions of the piece, if it also found fault with the execution.100

As can be gleaned from these notes based upon the vast press coverage, the actual content of Shadows over Harlem quickly receded behind its scandal, and, other than those present at the premiere, it was not only forgotten but never known.101 To this day, it has enjoyed but those three performances in Stuttgart in 1930. Current scholarship on interwar German culture contains but the barest of details concerning the piece, and, when mentioned at all, Shadows over Harlem exists primarily through the Nazi scandal recounted above. As Hans-Martin Ulmer notes in his study of antisemitism in Stuttgart, the focus on the idea of the scandal then (and I would add now) amounted to the “adoption of the National Socialist topos of the ‘theater scandal.’”102 In order to extricate discourse from this Nazi bind, we need first to rethink this work’s history and performance, not with an eye towards its disappearance but towards the conditions of its very appearance in an attempt to give voice back to an author, cast, and cultural movement silenced that evening.

The first note to make about Shadows over Harlem is that it was a collaborative effort uniting cultures and artists across Europe and the Atlantic. In addition to musical settings by the Hungarian composer Béla Reinitz and additional song texts supplied by the German communist poet Erich Weinert, its Russian-Jewish American author, Ossip Dymow, was heavily inspired by the New Negro movement, with which Dymow was potentially familiar from the time he spent in America and New York between 1913 and 1925.103 The title references the poem “Harlem Shadows” by Afro-Caribbean poet Claude McKay, first published in 1922. Furthermore, the cast reads as if it came from a roman à clef of the New Negro movement. The lead character is named Langston Johnson, a combination of Langston Hughes and James Weldon Johnson, author and first African American secretary of the NAACP. Dymow’s Langston also has a love interest, Gwendolyn, referencing the poet Gwendolyn Bennett whose poetry also appears in Africa Sings. Then there is Toomer, the Black millionaire, clearly inspired by the author Jean Toomer, whose novel Cane serves as the basis for two songs set by Reinitz. Though such references would have likely remained opaque to the audience, potentially explaining much of critics’ and audience members’ difficulties with the work, these refer-
ences to the Harlem Renaissance are crucial to understanding the cultural stakes of Dymow’s project.

The plot, which covers a single day, takes place in a Harlem cabaret named “Afrika.” The cabaret contains three levels: a kitchen where African Americans work almost without any contact with whites, a second level for the offices of the white owner Joe Hopkins, and a restaurant above where Blacks serve white guests. In this regard, the cabaret “Afrika” may have been modeled on the famous Cotton Club in Harlem, which showcased some of the greatest African American jazz bands and performers of the period, in particular Duke Ellington, but which was owned by the white bootlegger Owney Madden, hired light-skinned female dancers, and remained off-limits for most African Americans in Harlem. At any rate, the racial dynamics at the fictional cabaret reflect to a large degree the realities of Black-white relations in American society during the 1920s. For example, while the external conditions of segregation continue, they are beginning to fray as a result of ever-greater numbers of African Americans in northern cities and their demands for equality. Concretizing the link between his play and the New Negro movement, Dymow sets the club “Afrika” not just anywhere in Harlem but at 135th street, a location that has been called “the heart and soul of Black Harlem.” This street was the location of the Harlem YMCA, where Langston Hughes and other famous figures from the Harlem Renaissance lived, as well as the site of the 135th Street Library, now the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture.

The plot revolves around the two figures Langston and Gwendolyn, both recent transplants from the South, or “Dixieland” as it’s referred to in the play. Early on, Gwendolyn is given a mysterious telegram by the owner Hopkins and commanded to deliver it to Mr. Williams, a white guest, whose sexual advances she has already rebuffed in an earlier scene. Knowing that bringing anything to his room will result in Gwendolyn’s rape, Langston volunteers to deliver it for her. Yet, Langston’s motives are not entirely altruistic. As he says to Gwendolyn: “I want to tell you something. I’ve been thinking about this for a long time: We work—but the whites make the money. And how do they do that? Not with work [. . .] With telegrams. Whites make love with the telephone and make money through telegrams. I need money at the moment.” Opening the telegram, he discovers that it is an offer to purchase a huge tract of land in the American South, but payment in full must be made within the next twenty-four hours. This telegram sparks in Langston the idea of Harlem pooling its money to buy a kingdom for African Americans.

The cabaret workers choose their leadership and Langston serves the dual role of treasurer and messiah. For the constitution of their new country, Dy-
mow ironically models it on the democracy of the United States. As the stoker Esra, newly elected president of the republic, says: “We will lynch the whites! We will hang them. We will have a democracy. We will douse them with gasoline and burn them alive!”106 Parts of the German audience would surely have recoiled in shock at such images and some conservative commentators referenced the “Black Horror” in their critiques of the play. Yet, the horrible acts recounted here are based not on German but American conditions, and in all likelihood, it is the savagery of whites recounted here, such as the brutal lynching and burning of the African American George Hughes in Sherman, Texas, in May 1930 that was reported on in Germany as well.107 In referencing the brutality of what was known as “lynch justice,” Dymow may have been attempting to bypass the racial prejudice of the audience by, however clumsily, having the white German audience imagine itself as victim of this order. In the right-wing press, this strategy played into the hands of those who viewed in Blacks an animal and savage race. Thus, in the report issued by conservative media-mogul Alfred Hugenberg’s Telegraphen-Union, which appeared in numerous newspapers across Weimar Germany, the play’s plot was summarized as depicting Black longing for “bloody revenge against their white oppressors.”108

Naming their new country “Aetiopia,” the leadership further declares its intention to create a union of peoples of color, which will include their nation, as well as China and the Soviet Union. As was to be expected, the positive references to communism, along with a Jewish author, became the main points of reactionary attacks on Shadows over Harlem, which tended to interpret the piece as an allegory of communistic Zionism. The Nazi newspaper Der Angriff commented: “Threatening, muffled, future-oriented [zukunftsschwangere] revolt against centuries of injustice? Fine. One might forget that the author says ‘the Negroes’ and means ‘the Jews.’”109 Meanwhile, the Süddeutsche Zeitung will summarize the plot as a “grotesque, failed experiment in a Zionism for colored people.”110 While such attacks can be rejected for the ideological fantasies they are, it is also noteworthy that like Goslar, Rundt, and Nussbaum before him, Dymow’s Shadows over Harlem also plays off resonances between Zionism and Pan-Africanism.111 As we have seen throughout, German-speakers of Jewish descent not only were some of the most important translators of Hughes, they also framed their work in ways that invited parallels between their experience of diaspora and that of African Americans.

In this way, the German translation of Hughes’ modernist work, including its rejection as “cultural bolshevism” by the right, shares an investment in the trope of “Jewish modernism” (“die jüdische Moderne”) previously discussed in chapter 3. Here again, I will follow Scott Spector’s consideration of the con-
tradictions and tensions that surround the overdetermined relationship between “Jewishness” and modernism in Central European discourse, as it is something clearly at work within the translation and reception of Hughes in German, though in ways that differ from its treatment in Gustav Renker’s *Symphony and Jazz*. Spector describes this idea as an “elusive object that is not a body of work nor a register of authors, but a way of thinking about oneself and one’s place in relation to the past, the future, and creativity.”¹¹² In other words, modernism and Jewishness are, for better and worse, intimately related within the Central European cultural imaginary; it is a way of thinking that produces such strange bedfellows as Goslar and Widenbauer, Dymow and his Nazi critics. More importantly, attempts to revalue the connection through inversion of the Nazis’ racist reading or even through disavowal of the connection are equally problematic. In Spector’s view, both the valorization of modernist works like *Shadows over Harlem*, as having been decidedly shaped by Central European Jews, as well as its opposite, namely the insistence upon the “Gentile” origins of modernism, share particularly discomfiting Nazi analogues: in the rhetoric of “cultural bolshevism” on the one hand and in the Nazi requirement of baptismal certificates to prove “Aryan” heritage on the other.¹¹³

In the case of works like *Shadows over Harlem*, Spector’s argument suggests, scholars must both avoid reading it solely as a “Jewish” text, while at the same time striving to uncover the specific ways Dymow’s experience of diaspora informs the piece’s modernism. In the examples of Dymow, Goslar, and Nussbaum, this could begin with an acknowledgement of the multiple ways in which their displaced, peripatetic lives created a situation that fostered diasporic reciprocity between their own experience and that of the African American authors they were translating. At the same time, to view their works primarily through their “Jewishness,” in other words, to replace Dymow’s African American characters with Central European Jews, would, in many ways, reproduce the same ideological matrix that led to the right-wing rejection of the piece. A reading of *Shadows over Harlem* as an allegory of European Zionism would depend not only upon erasing the history of contact and exchange between African American and German-language Jewish authors, it would also ignore the ways in which Dymow ironizes, indeed undercuts, the plan of the cabaret workers through comedy and exaggeration. Rather than allegorizing Zionism through the New Negro movement, Hughes’ Central European Jewish translators and adaptors Dymow, Goslar, Rundt, and Nussbaum are all after something rather more complicated.

In *Shadows over Harlem*, Dymow intends not only to depict the exploitation and persecution of African Americans but also their strategies for
countering it. Though by no means wholly successful in this endeavor, the finale of *Shadows over Harlem* points towards such a deeper engagement with the aesthetics of the New Negro movement. Towards the end of the work, Langston is duped into handing over the telegram to the callous Black millionaire Toomer, who promises to pay for the land himself and then share it with the others. When Langston realizes that Toomer’s real intent is to exclude him and the rest of Harlem, he protests, only to have Toomer call the police and claim that Langston has stolen money from him. The police discover $250 on Langston, the money collected from the cabaret workers, and arrest him. Though he adamantly denies having stolen the money, he also refuses to say where it is from. As the police investigate further, they eventually speak with Gwendolyn. She deceives them, saying that the money is hers, earned as a prostitute for Langston. This explanation suits the white policemen and Langston is promptly released. Now freed and back amongst the cabaret workers, he admits to having lost the telegram to Toomer. Upon learning this, the cabaret workers turn on Langston and threaten to lynch him. Fleeing the mob, Langston escapes and finds refuge in one of the cabaret’s private rooms. There he finds Gwendolyn and the telegram’s original owner Mr. Williams. It is at this point that Williams reveals to both of them that the telegram was a fake all along, an invention meant to lure Gwendolyn to his room. In other words, Gwendolyn and Langston learn that there never was any land to be bought, never any republic to be founded, and that the entire dream of independence had been built upon white deception.

Without any time to let this fact set in, the Black lynch mob breaks into the room and is told of Williams’ machinations. Yet, the assembled cast neither cries nor rises up in anger but laughs heartily and goes immediately, quietly back to work. As Dymow writes in the final stage directions: “One after the other, the Negroes begin to laugh, ever wilder and louder. A sympathy of laughter comes into being.” For critics, on the left and right, it was at this point that the integrity of the piece eroded entirely. They simply could not grasp why the situation should provoke laughter; it was clearly a tragic, rather than comedic, ending. As Düssel wrote: “A tragic, frantically wailing conclusion to a comedy simply makes no sense.” This seemingly inexplicable laughter is followed by the assembled cast’s recitation of Hughes’ 1922 poem “Laughers,” in its English original no less. The poem includes the lines: “Dream-singers, / Story-tellers, [ . . . ] / Loud laughers in the hands of Fate.”

As mentioned earlier, for Hughes, laughter is not only a product of happiness but is part of a blues aesthetic in which the absurdity of American racial realities intertwines comedy and tragedy so fully that they become indis-
tistinguishable. As he writes in his gloss on the genre cited at this chapter’s outset: “The mood of the Blues is almost always despondency, but when they are sung, people laugh.” Or as he states elsewhere, the blues is a form defined by “hopeless weariness mixed with an absurdly incongruous laughter.” Blues qua laughter acts as a survival strategy of African Americans in the face of oppression. For such laughter is, amongst other things, also a mask, a projection of happiness and docility that can function as subterfuge amongst those aware of its ironic intent. This type of laughter, like that occurring at the end of Shadows over Harlem, provokes laughter of laughter, ironizing and indeed inverting the agreement normally associated with the act. The African American characters at the end of the piece laugh neither at their dream nor its failure but in the face of oppression. Their laughter suggests they will carry on and live to dream again. As Dymow wrote less than six months after the play’s cancellation in a piece about Harlem and its poets Hughes, McKay, and Toomer in the Vienna newspaper Das kleine Blatt: “Their poems reveal what is hidden behind the ever-friendly, naively-sincere (kindlich-aufrichtig) smile of the American Negro.” One might suggest, therefore, that under the cover of comedy, Dymow has smuggled in an African American aesthetic form and that Shadows over Harlem can stand as a, albeit awkward, translation of the blues for German theater.

Such an endeavor in Germany in 1930 was ultimately destined to failure in a very important sense: its call to understanding and sympathy could not depend on a knowing response from the Stuttgart audience, and Dymow’s rich web of allusions fell mostly on deaf ears, its irony taken by many critics for literalness. Yet, the play’s transatlantic call did elicit a response in the African American press. In the Baltimore Afro-American, there appeared a short note on the scandal. After referring to the plot of the play as a depiction of the “oppression of the Negro in America” and recounting what it terms the “riot” of October 19th, the short review concludes: “The play was objected to because a group known as the ‘Nazis’ believe that the new Negro culture is ruining the German culture.” Unlike other articles in the American press, this piece adds an important, if seemingly trivial, detail. In this report, the Nazis don’t merely object to African American culture, “Negro culture,” as the New York Times put it, they object to the “new Negro culture.” To its African American readership, this would have meant, amongst other things, the modernism of the Harlem Renaissance. No author is given for the report, and it is unclear whether this addition was based on knowledge or merely surmised. Of course, such a quiet moment of dialogue between Weimar culture and African American modernism is all but inaudible against the loud chants of the brown
shirts outside the theater. Still, the message it carries, of a neglected history of communication and miscommunication between African and Jewish diasporic communities between Russia, Vienna, Berlin, Stuttgart, and Harlem, is certainly one worth hearing.

“As I Grew Older:” Weimar Culture and African American Modernism

Back in Vienna, Anna Nussbaum followed the events surrounding *Shadows over Harlem* and reported on the situation to W. E. B. Du Bois, on November 7 and December 29, 1930. She continued to correspond with him through the spring of 1931, sending him a final note on May 31, after which she unexpectedly passed away on June 28. In her death, the focus and drive behind the dissemination and translation of African American poetry in Germany and Austria had suffered a loss from which it did not recover until after the Second World War. With Nussbaum’s death, the economic downturn, and the rise of the Nazis, the Weimar encounter with Hughes is one that seemed to go missing after 1933. After 1945, new translators worked to make Hughes, once again, known to the German public in the East and West. While such postwar efforts perhaps bore greater fruit in terms of the overall public recognition of Hughes, Dymow’s *Shadows over Harlem* and Nussbaum’s *Africa Sings*, as well as the other examples analyzed here, cannot simply be written off as islands of insight in a sea of “jazz age” ignorance. Instead, they need to be seen as having been on the forefront of something much larger and deeper: a new sense of the aesthetic and cultural achievements of African Americans and peoples of African descent. And if the Stuttgart audience had not been able to answer the transatlantic call of Dymow’s text, the translation of Langston Hughes more generally can be viewed as an example of Edward’s idea of “diasporic reciprocity” as a “call to translate.” This unique state of affairs was indebted as much to the status of German-speaking Jews in Central Europe as to the transnational reach of Black modern expression. It is only as a result of the modernist movement of the Harlem Renaissance and the concomitant interest in jazz across the United States, Europe, and Germany that writers like Goslar, Rundt, Dymow, and Nussbaum, along with many others, were no longer merely speaking about African Americans but, rather, also having African Americans like Langston Hughes speak through them.

To be sure, the translation of Langston Hughes’ poetry was not the only example of American and African American culture speaking in Weimar Ger-
many. As we have seen throughout, exposure to American culture produced complex responses on the part of Weimar Germans as they struggled to reconcile the seemingly irreconcilable elements of music, race, and American culture. If many of these instances like those of Dymow and to a lesser extent Nussbaum were largely forgotten, the struggles of one young philosopher cum musician to make sense of this new culture have remained especially audible within the history of jazz in Germany. This is Theodor W. Adorno, whose works such as *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* (cowritten with Max Horkheimer) have influenced generations of scholars. From the 1930s to 1960s, Adorno and other philosophers associated with the Frankfurt School, such as Walter Benjamin and Herbert Marcuse, supplied scholars and radical thinkers with a new vocabulary to analyze and critique capitalist culture. In the most positive sense, Adorno and the Frankfurt School were amongst the first to discuss popular culture with the same theoretical rigor that had previously retained for high culture alone. In a more negative way, they used the standards of high cultural analysis to do so. Of course for many, no better example of the limitations of Frankfurt School critical theory can be found than in Adorno’s thoroughgoing and long-standing rejection of jazz. From the 1930s to the 1950s, Adorno repeatedly sought to debunk jazz as reactionary, rather than progressive, as repressive, rather than liberatory; a position that could lead to inflammatory statements such as that “jazz and the pogrom belong together.” Still, as I want to explore in my final chapter, even as staunch a critic as Adorno was not free from the influence of Weimar’s jazz republic.