

Dear workshopers,

Thanks so much for taking the time to read this first draft of what I ultimately hope to turn into an article. I'm just starting with this piece, so I'm open to any feedback you might be willing to share. I'm particularly concerned with how the arguments various parts hang together, especially in the final section in which I try to insert this piece into broader literary historical discourses. I'm also interested in how the history I do in this piece is working--if there's enough or too much and how I connect it to literature.

Again, thank you for reading and I look forward to seeing you at noon on February 12 in Rosenwald 405!  
Kevin

### The Weird Pullman Porter: Race and Antimodernism at the Closing of the Frontier<sup>1</sup>

The Pullman porter has been an object of enduring scholarly interest because he has played central roles in American histories of race and labor. His characteristic trait is his capacity to efface his humanity. Pullman porters were anonymous; they often answered to "George," in an homage to the founder of the Pullman Palace Car Company (Tye 2). In the performance of their duties, they essentially became machines rather than people, offering flawless, endlessly repetitive service without producing in their clients the uncomfortable impression that they might have opinions, desires, or other human features. Aiding the white imagination's image of the Pullman porter as a mass produced automaton was the fact of the racial and class homogeneity of these workers and the strict standards of appearance enforced by their employer (Hall 92, Tye 40). For white rail passengers, Pullman porters formed a part of the material world of the Pullman car, but like any machine, they were understood to be capable of possessing neither agency nor knowledge. Indeed, if they were to break a facade of self-abnegating subservience or otherwise produce in the minds of their clients the impression that they were capable of observation or judgment, a certain kind of fantasy about postbellum black labor would be lost and they would be unsuited for the work that was required--work that put them into intimate

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<sup>1</sup> This paper includes material presented as sections of the conference paper "The Dancing, Chanting Terrapin: Genre Fiction in the Early *Sunset* Magazine," which I presented at the 2016 annual meeting of the Western Literature Association in Big Sky, MT.

proximity with white passengers in their most embarrassing and vulnerable moments. The Pullman porter could not be permitted to be anyone or know anything. Even historians interested in the extraordinary contributions of Pullman porters and their union, the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, to the American labor movement and who highlight the extraordinary agency and courage that their organizing required of them, nonetheless insist that for riders, the porters were nonentities. Larry Tye, whose 2004 book *Rising from the Rails* is the most current and complete historical work on Pullman porters puts it succinctly: “Ideally it would be a man you could look at but not notice, as if he did not exist. An invisible man” (25).

Here, I complicate this standard reading of the figure of the Pullman porter by showing how a short story from the railroad magazine *Sunset* presents the Pullman porter in a different light. I argue that Paul F. Shoup’s “By Order of the Moon: A Tale of a Desert Treasure” attributes the capacity to possess and transmit weird knowledge to the Pullman porter and that this attribution forces readers to reevaluate this figure’s formal and thematic marginality.<sup>2</sup> Rather than reading the Pullman porter’s marginality as a form of inattention associated with ordinariness and the absence of psychological interiority or knowledge beyond merely technical know-how, this story represents the Pullman porter as a figure at the edges of modern epistemologies, anticipating literary modernism’s preoccupations with primitivism and its

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<sup>2</sup> Shoup was 24 years old when “By Order of the Moon” appeared in *Sunset*. He spent his early career as a writer, but he advanced quickly in the Southern Pacific. By the 1920s, he was a top executive in the company and a member of the founding board of the Stanford Graduate School of Business. That he moved so rapidly up the corporate ladder in such an important company is certainly indicative of his ability and connections, but it also suggests the importance and success of his earliest work for the company: writing stories that played instrumental roles in promoting the American West and the interests of the Southern Pacific. Shoup’s papers are collected at Stanford, but there is no material related to the early, literary period of his associated with the Southern Pacific and the early records of the magazine were destroyed by the 1906 earthquake and fire that devastated San Francisco.

epistemological and aesthetic potential.<sup>3</sup> By “weird knowledge,” I mean knowledge that transcends the established and well-policed boundaries of science and reason. At stake here is understanding how the Pullman porter, an avatar of socioeconomic advancement occupies a fraught place between the technological changes reshaping American life at the turn of the twentieth century and the antimodern impulses that rose to meet those changes. Also at stake is the contributions of the weird story to high modernism, which constitutes yet another elaboration of the surprising connections between the least and most socially prestigious American cultural forms in this period. I begin with some brief context about the historical Pullman porter and that history’s contributions to the figure of the Pullman porter as it appears in the popular imagination before moving to a summary and reading of the story in question. Then, I show how a Pullman porter rendered weird rather than ordinary fits into several important critical conversations on race and (anti)modernism, specifically the role of racialized primitivism in the emergence of modernist art and the role of the weird tale in the development of modernist pessimism about the potential of science and technology to reliably improve the conditions of human life.

The Pullman porter emerged as a response to demand for more comfortable forms of long-distance travel in the wake of the Civil War. The rapid expansion of rails across the United States produced new possibilities for individual mobility, but overnight travel presented challenges to the traveler. The first sleeper cars in the United States were in circulation by 1830, but they were notoriously uncomfortable (Santino 6). Horace Greeley was among those who in the years before the spread of Pullman cars bemoaned the discomfort of long rail journeys marred by tight quarters and poor ventilation, which reliably created disgusting and unsanitary

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<sup>3</sup> I see this weird Pullman porter as a prefiguration of other examples of romanticized blackness, such as what Spike Lee has called the “magical Negro,” stock black characters who possess special knowledge or capacities that they use to help or encourage white protagonists or the American Indian noble savage.

conditions (Tye 8). George Pullman was an engineer who had moved from Albion, New York to Chicago in 1855 and found rapid success in the project of elevating buildings to accommodate the installation of the city's new sewer system (Tye 6). By 1860, he had turned his attention to the problem of overnight rail travel and saw the demand for more comfortable accommodations: a "modern hotel on wheels" (*Sunset* 101). A key component to his vision of a more luxurious travel experience was that his cars would not be sold to railroads, but rather leased to them, and that he would retain control over every aspect of the customer's experience in them, including the service. Pullman porters were employees of the Pullman Palace Car Company and became the brand's public face. Pullman realized that creating an atmosphere of extraordinary luxury, featuring personalized service, was crucial to attracting and retaining the middle class client base he was targeting. Poor Americans would be unable to afford luxurious rail travel and wealthy Americans would have their own servants, so Pullman porters were enlisted to offer a veneer of luxury to a middle class audience eager to experience a taste of the high life (Tye 43). They inherited images of luxury from the prewar South, where the hallmark of the high life was a black slave. Pullman recruited his porters from the ranks of former slaves for three reasons: labor supply was high and ex-slaves had limited alternative sources of work, black employees were at a "social distance" from their white customers, which made it more acceptable for them to work with customers on terms of extreme intimacy required by sleeping car travel, and black workers were perceived as more amenable to working under conditions that required that they display a "servile attitude" (Breazeal 1-2). These latter two reasons are the most salient in reading representations of the Pullman porter in visual culture and in literature. In a poster advertising Pullman service on the Cincinnati, Hamilton & Dayton, the Pullman porter occupies a literally

marginal space and the artist's choices conspire to render him a machinelike object, even in an image produced for the express purpose of advertising his excellent service.

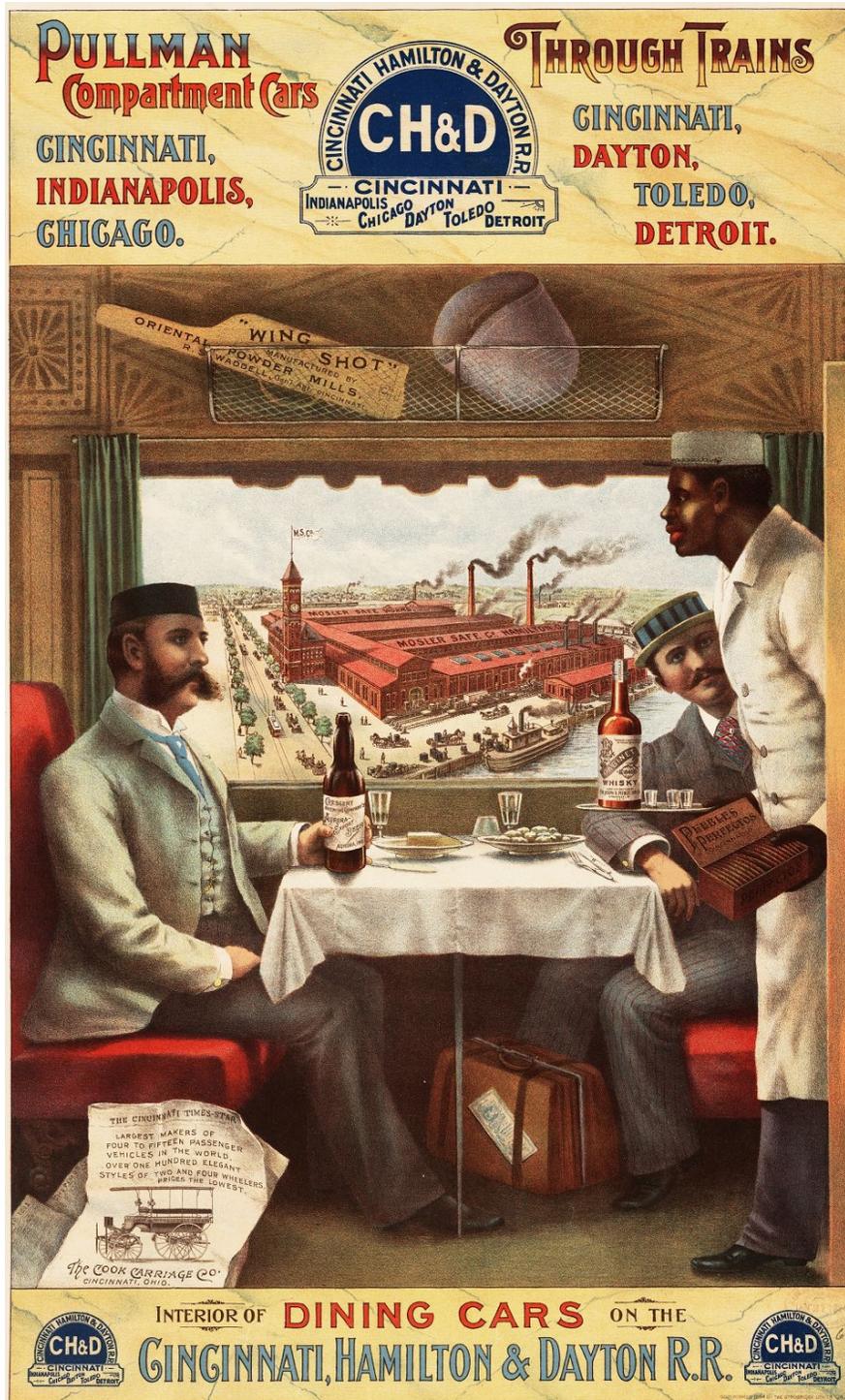


Fig. 1 Pullman compartment cars through trains -- interior of dining cars on the Cincinnati, Hamilton & Dayton R.R. c1894 Jan. 27. Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division.

The two white passengers engage the viewer with attitudes suggesting depth and dimension, and offering opportunities for the reader to identify with them and vicariously enjoy their luxurious surroundings. They sit in three-quarters profile or staring directly out of the page at the viewer. They possess rounded figures and rosy cheeks and their body language is relaxed and natural. In contrast, the Pullman porter almost disappears into the poster's framing elements, visually rhyming with the hanging draperies, the right angles of the train car's window, and vertical designs on the wallpaper. His dark face almost disappears in the contrast between the light coming in through the window and the darkness of the railcar. His face is in profile, looking at his customers rather than the viewer and its sharp angles are more suggestive of a sleek piece of industrial machinery than a human. The profile of his body is almost a perfectly straight line, even as he leans solicitously forward to offer whiskey and cigars to his customers. The Pullman porter, in this image, is more machine than man, and his ability to disappear is evidence of his excellence at his work.

Though the "invisible man" or machine was the ideal for Pullman porters according to historical accounts and in the way the porters were advertised, the literary evidence is somewhat mixed. Though some white writers simply chose not to represent Pullman porters at all in their accounts of train travel, Tye argues that even for those who did, representations of Pullman porters were generally "foggy and one-dimensional" (173). One potential exception is an episode from the anarchist Emma Goldman's 1931 memoir *Living My Life*. She and her lover Benny Reitman sneak some drink onto their train during prohibition and a Pullman porter brings them ice and shares the alcohol and some conversation. Goldman finds him a "philosopher and artist" and enjoys his stories and "mimicry of the passengers." For Tye, this is an exceptional moment

in white writing on Pullman porters: “Was he Goldman’s gracious host? Her submissive servant? Like most Pullman passengers, she and Reitman could not quite decide, so they had it both ways. They let him in on their law-breaking, even inviting him to become a coconspirator by taking a prohibited drink. But they called him ‘George,’ suggesting he was George Pullman’s property, and saw him more as entertainment than as a social equal” (Tye 172-173). But while Goldman’s memoir begins to complicate the placement of the Pullman porter in the social and racial hierarchies of the turn of the century United States, the Pullman porter troubles epistemological hierarchies as well. Not only does the Pullman porter occupy a transgressive position in that he is an ex-slave coming into intimate contact with a world of white the white middle class, he is also a figure that brings enchantment into a world increasingly placing its trust in science and rationality. To show how this enchantment works in practice, I will offer the example of the Paul F. Shoup short story “By Order of the Moon: A Tale of a Desert Treasure,” which appeared in the first issue of *Sunset* magazine in May 1898.

Because “By Order of the Moon” is a little-known story, I will briefly summarize it here. The action opens in a comfortable train car on the Sunset Limited. As the train flies across the desert, an unnamed “Eminent Scientist” holds forth in a lounge car, fascinating all of his listeners except, perhaps, for the narrator, who describes how the Scientist “talked and talked,” and for the dapper “Mysterious Stranger,” who yawns during the scientific discourse and gazes at the rising moon with evident affection (9). The Scientist is puzzled by the Stranger’s friendly expression in the direction of what he sees as an inanimate object, and asks the Stranger to explain himself. The Stranger responds with a truly bizarre story. One night, alone in the desert, he encounters an enormous terrapin with a strikingly sad and human expression. Like Coleridge’s ancient mariner,

he kills it for reasons that he can't explain. As he guiltily polishes the shell in the moonlight, he discovers upon it "a page of history in picture language," disclosing the location of a nearby buried treasure (9). He digs furiously at the spot represented on the shell, only to find an empty cavern as an eerie, sarcastic laugh echoes around him. However, as days pass and the moon waxes, the Stranger feels increasingly compelled to return to the spot until one night, he wakes up to find himself looking up at the moon as he is dragged, lassoed around the neck by the terrapin's ghost. At this point, the terrapin begins to waltz and chant in strange couplets and the rising moon reveals a horde of terrapins, who morph into a spectral medieval army, led by a beautiful princess. The princess directs the Stranger—in verse—to return to the cavern, which is now filled with riches. Back on the train, the Eminent Scientist dismisses the dancing, chanting terrapin as a dream and quickly furnishes his audience a scientific explanation for the disappearing and reappearing treasure involving the tidal activity of the nearby Colorado River, but the Stranger merely looks continues to look at the moon and murmur, "My best friend." The narrative concludes as the Stranger disappears at the stop for Yuma. When the Scientist asks the porter for the Stranger's name, the answer is in thick vernacular: "Dat's Mistah Ma'cus 'Relvus Johnson, one ob de fines' gemmen an'—an' de bigges' liah in de whole Soufwest" (10).

Some institutional context is helpful in understanding the work that this story was intended to undertake. This was a magazine with a very clear commercial goal: economic boosterism for the American West. The magazine in which it appeared, *Sunset*, was an organ of the Passenger Division of the Southern Pacific Company. The railroad accepted the expense of publishing the magazine because it believed that it could effectively promote the financial interests of the company by encouraging not only passenger travel to the tourist destinations in

the West, but also by bringing human and finance capital from the East Coast to the rapidly developing region. The editors were open about their aims; the magazine describes its “creed” as “Publicity for the attractions and advantages of the Western Empire” and its “aim” as “the presentation, in a convenient form, of information concerning the great states of California, Oregon, Nevada, Texas, Louisiana, and the territories of Arizona and New Mexico—a rich and inexhaustible field over which the dawn of future commercial and industrial importance is just breaking” (1). In the service of a boosterist discourse about the West, one that readers might expect to emphasize the ways in which the West is owned, known, and therefore safe for prudent investors of capital, it is a bit surprising that Shoup turns to the mystical and unknowable qualities of the frontier. However, weird fiction has the capacity to produce a sense of mystery and excitement about the West. As the frontier was closing, the regional distinctiveness of the West was fading. If the West were like the rest of the country, it wouldn’t have the extraordinary financial opportunities that one might have expected in the past, represented in the popularly circulating images of rapid wealth accrual associated with Western resource rushes. The fiction in *Sunset* was aimed at deploying literary techniques to revivify regional distinctiveness. To make travel and investment in the West enticing to readers elsewhere, it is crucial to explain that the West offered something that was unavailable anywhere else. Fiction like “By Order of the Moon” shows that the West is a place to escape the overcivilization, Taylorism, and modernization afflicting the East Coast. The Pullman porter contributes to this effort with his picturesque accent and knowledge, which might on the one hand be characterized as merely local, but in troubling the Scientist’s rational critique of the Mysterious Stranger’s story, might on the other hand be understood to constitute what might be called weird boosterism.

Shoup allegorizes this work of romanticization and mystification within the plot of the story itself. The frame narrative establishes a dichotomy between the Eminent Scientist from elsewhere and the Mysterious Stranger, who the porter marks as a local. The Scientist is a national, even hemispheric figure; the narrator links him to flows of capital and media that reach not only his rapt audience in the West, but also the tobacco industry of the South and a national marketing apparatus: “He was a very famous man, indeed: so famous that his picture appeared on the boxes of a peculiarly atrocious brand of cigars.” The Stranger, on the other hand, represents a regionally coded mystical space untouchable by science. He tells listeners: “I have seen the tide forty feet high go roaring up the Rio Colorado and heard its only answer in that vast stretch of silent loneliness when from some sand dune a coyote howled and howled in endless melancholy, and then the Spirit of the Desert has come into me. Is it strange I have known things not found within sight of the smoke of a hearth-fire?” (9). It is only beyond the sight of the hearth-fire’s smoke and the social and epistemological regime that the Scientist embodies that the Stranger feels the presence of the Spirit of the Desert. The Scientist wants to quash the Stranger’s mystical regionalism. He tells the Stranger that his vision, “The part about the knights and soldiers is absurd—utterly absurd—of course you dreamed it” (10). But in this story, there is no resolution of the tension between science and mysticism. Shoup denies readers the satisfaction of one man proving the other wrong. Instead, he further muddies the waters by using the Pullman porter.

The Pullman porter reveals that the Mysterious Stranger is no stranger at all; he’s a liar, and a familiar figure, a Mr. Marcus Aurelius Johnson. But even as the porter deflates the mystical aura that the Stranger cultivates for himself and throws water on his strange tale by

calling him a liar, the porter continues to weave a fantastic thread: Mr. Johnson is not merely a liar, but rather the biggest liar in the whole Southwest and, paradoxically, one of its finest gentlemen. Ironically, the porter uses this contradictory and hyperbolic language to disparage Johnson for being a speaker of contradiction and hyperbole. The Pullman porter's contribution, which ends Shoups story, leaves the reader suspended between the Scientist and the Stranger, between science and mysticism. The romantic veil woven by the Stranger and Shoup alike remains intact. As discredited as the Stranger is by being outed as a liar, the Scientist, too, loses face when knowledge and authority are transferred from him, as he holds forth at the story's beginning, to the anonymous Pullman porter upon whom the Scientist relies for information at the story's end. Most types of information are readily available to the Scientist through modern means. His explanation for the appearance and disappearance of the treasure is vague and far-fetched, but it has the advantage of conforming to known natural laws. For him, his explanation is the preferable one because it relies on modern rather than weird epistemologies. But as the reader finds out, the West is a place where modern knowledge can't explain everything and even the cosmopolitan Eminent Scientist must turn to a Pullman porter for help. Here, the Pullman porter is not the smiling, ever-obliging, empty-headed automaton. He has been transformed into a vessel of weird knowledge; he knows things that the Eminent Scientist doesn't know and moreover *can't* know. The Eminent Scientist's very modernity fetters his ability to access that which exists "beyond the sight of the hearth-fire's smoke." He is stymied in his attempts to reconcile his modern knowledge with the weird, local knowledge of the Mysterious Stranger. When he tries to offer a scientific explanation for the Mysterious Stranger's observation, the latter simply turns away and ultimately disappears. The Scientist can only turn

to the porter: the liminal figure, suspended between slavery and modernity, the black world and the white. He is the conduit of weird knowledge in a modern era.

The Pullman porter as an envoy of weird epistemologies plays a pivotal and necessary role in the representation of the epistemological clash we see represented in this story. When the Mysterious Stranger literally turns away from the Eminent Scientist's questions and theories to gaze at the moon, and ultimately alights without a word to his metropolitan interlocutor, it is the Pullman porter that offers a tantalizing but frustratingly incomplete conciliatory gesture. Examining the epistemological clash that constitutes the the essential conflict in the story, it is initially hard to see what role race might play, since both the Mysterious Strangers and the Eminent Scientist are implicitly white. The mystical knowledge of the Mysterious Stranger, however, is racially coded. His characterization of his local knowledge invokes the "Spirit of the Desert" and the figure of the coyote, a trickster and an intermediary between the supernatural and natural worlds in many indigenous cultures in what is now Arizona.<sup>4</sup> This coyote resembles the role that the Pullman porter plays in Shoup's story. Coding the Mysterious Stranger's story as an Indian tale fits into a broader tension in American culture of valorizing modern scientific knowledge over epistemologies coded as Indian and therefore savage while at the same time reading noble savagery and the the magic knowledge systems associated with it as a necessary rejoinder to modernist impulses roiling American culture. The murder of the innocent terrapin with its sad, humanlike expression and its odd, ritualistic dancing evokes the genocide of the American Indian. The senselessness of the violence that that the Mysterious Stranger visits upon the terrapin and the riches that he inherits as a result of his bloody deed contaminate him with the

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<sup>4</sup> See "Coyote" in David Leeming's *Oxford Companion to World Mythology* (83).

Indian's subaltern knowledge and unfit him for respectable participation in modern culture; he is a teller of tall tales, a big liar, not a scientist.<sup>5</sup> The name that the Pullman porter attributes to him, "Mistah Ma'cus 'Relvus Johnson" or "Marcus Aurelius Johnson" ironically invokes Marcus Aurelius, composer of *Meditations*, a foundational work in stoic philosophy, which in its fierce insistence on reason, analysis, and skepticism of subjective personal experience anticipates modern scientific tenets. The appendage "Johnson" twists the identity of the Mysterious Stranger away from the stoic Marcus Aurelius, suggesting his departure from his namesake's philosophy and opening up a place in his identity for enchantment, mysticism, and individual experience.

The Mysterious Stranger, like the romanticized figure of the Indian, full of weird knowledge, that he comes to represent, vanishes before the Eminent Scientist can try in earnest to discredit his weird knowledge and declare the triumph of modern, scientific knowledge. The character left to manage the desperate and perplexed Scientist is the Pullman porter, another imperfect vessel for the Indian's weird knowledge. The Pullman porter possess qualities that suit him to the role of cultural and epistemological intermediary, as his circulation throughout the United States through the new networks of the railroad produces an illusion of ubiquity. If one way of reading the collapse of individual identity in the Pullman porter is to associate him with mass production--the identicality of each "George" reinforced by his training and standards or appearance--another way of reading this quality is to associate it with supernatural ability. Likewise, his white clients' ignorance of his past and personality might suggest to readers that these details are uninteresting, but this ignorance clears space for a fantasy of weird experience

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<sup>5</sup> Pullman porters possessed their own tall tales, usually concerning the first Pullman porter, a figure they called Daddy Joe, "a Bunyanesque figure tall enough to pull down upper berths on either side of the aisle at the same time, agile enough to prepare uppers and lowers simultaneously, and so appreciated by riders that his pockets were weighed down with silver and gold" (Tye 3-4).

and knowledge. In Shoup's story, like in all art that manages to even register the existence of the Pullman porter, the figure exists only at the fringes. He appears only in the closing handful of lines, but he has the final word. This marginality is legible not only as a pejorative statement about his insignificance or lack of human qualities; rather, it can also be read as a marker of his liminal epistemological qualities. His racial otherness grants him access to weird knowledge beyond the ken of white science. The Mysterious Stranger having had direct contact with the Spirit of the Desert is already incomprehensible to the Eminent Scientist. Despite sharing the Scientist's whiteness, he turns too fully away from modernity to be interested in being comprehended, so the Pullman porter is left to offer what information the Eminent Scientist might be capable of imbibing. Though the Pullman porter is able to transmit knowledge to the Scientist, Shoup introduces frictions, both in the form of his black skin, which sets up expectations about hierarchies of knowledge that the story ultimately violates, and also in the form of his vernacular. Shoup goes to extreme lengths to represent for his readers not only the content of the Pullman porter's speech, but also the aesthetics of the speech's form. Shoup renders the Pullman porter's few lines of dialogue a challenge to interpret, slowing the reader down to mark the speaker's otherness.<sup>6</sup> This racial and verbal otherness figures his access to the epistemological otherness that the Mysterious Stranger embodies but cannot adequately transmit.

The weird Pullman porter not only offers readers an opportunity to reassess the figure of the Pullman porter himself, an important endeavour in itself due to this figure's significance in 19th and 20th century American histories of race, labor, and culture. The weird Pullman porter

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<sup>6</sup> While this representational choice is obtrusive to the modern reader, it's not at all uncommon in 19th century literature. See, for example, Mark Twain's use of vernacular writing in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884). See also Shelley Fisher Fishkin's *Was Huck Black?: Mark Twain and African-American Voices* (1994). Nonetheless, it calls attention to the social gap between the Eminent Scientist and the Pullman porter.

also contributes new evidence about transatlantic modernism and literary genre, demonstrating the paradoxical influence of the primitive and the weird on modernist aesthetic values that they ostensibly undermine, like novelty, minimalism, and realism (Lemke 145). As Lemke points out in *Primitivist Modernism*, American modernist aesthetics were shot through with apparent contradictions. A paradigmatic example for her is the way that early 20th century Germans saw both the Fordist assembly line and jazz music as enormously attractive emblems of American modernism. How could such aesthetically different objects both be identified with the same movement? It's relatively straightforward to see how the assembly line might be associated with the scientific and technological aspects of modernity and the emergence of modernism, but without understanding the significance of the primitive, it's hard to see how an art form associated with improvisation and an African-American culture understood by most American and European elites to be in its intellectual and cultural infancy could be emblematic of modernism. The story of John Henry, a tall tale concerning a competition between a "steel driving man" and a steam hammer, dramatizes the complex relationship between black labor and industrialization. In the story, John Henry ultimately defeats the steam hammer in a head to head contest, but he ultimately dies from the effort he expends. The triumph but ultimate demise of John Henry against the technology that will soon replace him and others in his profession exposes the ambivalence moderns felt about the technology that could improve their lives in obvious ways but also bear incalculable spiritual costs. The heroic John Henry, unlike the undifferentiated Pullman porters transcends his blackness to become a recognizably human hero, and his death is therefore a tragedy. Unlike the steam hammer, he knows and feels things, and

when he dies, even having momentarily defeated the machine, it is an ominous portent that shades the inevitability of the triumph of technology with pessimism.

Located in this ambivalent space between optimism and dread of both technology and the primitive, the Pullman porter participates in a discourse about the access of racial others to special forms of knowledge that reaches back to the European Enlightenment or even the later part of the early modern period in the figure of the noble savage, but despite appearing as early as the 1860s, the Pullman porter also anticipates modernist aesthetics that don't become substantially expressed in canonical art until the 20th century.<sup>7</sup> A foundational moment for the adoption of so-called primitivism into modernism is Pablo Picasso's encounter with African art at the *Musée d'Ethnographie du Trocadéro* and his composition of *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. Version O)* (1907), which occurs several years after the representation of the Pullman porter I explore in this piece.<sup>8</sup> The figure of the Pullman porter, however, in the blackness of his body and his machinelike qualities embodies many of the aesthetic features of modernism. Cheng, in *Second Skin*, argues that Josephine Baker's black skin participates in what she calls a discourse of the "pure" modern surface," which finds paradigmatic expression in the work of the Moravian architect Adolf Loos. For Cheng, the modern surface "produces a nexus of metonymic meanings—purity, cleanliness, simplicity, anonymity, masculinity, civilization, technology, intellectual abstractism—that are set off against notions of excessive adornment, inarticulate sensuality, femininity, backward-ness" (26). Despite it emerging long after the figure of the

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<sup>7</sup> The term "noble savage" first appeared in the 17th century (John Dryden's 1762 play *The Conquest of Granada*) and the idea that human nature is good and becomes corrupted by civilization is ubiquitous the work of Shaftesbury and Rousseau. That human nature would not be corrupted by civilization in less civilized is an apparent corollary to this claim.

<sup>8</sup> As Lemke concedes, the influence of African art on *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. Version O)* and even whether or not Picasso visited the Trocadéro in advance of making the pivotal decisions about the painting remains a matter of debate (33).

Pullman porter, the aesthetic of the modern surface does much to explain the Pullman porter's appeal. The idealized Pullman porter is an avatar of purity, cleanliness, simplicity, anonymity, masculinity, civilization, technology, and, for the white traveler, intellectual abstractism.<sup>9</sup> Cheng ultimately finds adornment, sensuality, and femininity in Loos's work in ways that cannot be neatly marginalized, as some have attempted, by drawing distinctions between his interiors and exteriors (28). For her, the broader stakes lie in elaborating and exploring the often paradoxical relationships between exterior and interior, presence and absence, skin and essence. Indeed, antimodern aesthetics cannot be neatly delaminated from the figure of the Pullman porter in this story, even as he becomes a vessel of weird, antimodern epistemologies. He possesses both a modern surface and he also represents for a white readership an embodiment of primitive knowledge. In this way, the Pullman porter belongs to a discourse about race and modernity very familiar to literary scholars of modernism: that, as Lemke puts it, "Black, or African-inspired expressions have played a seminal role in the shaping of modernism" (4). What might be less familiar about this account, though, is the way that primitivist racial otherness becomes irreducible to blackness. Despite his apparent blackness, the Pullman porter in "By Order of the Moon" invokes other forms of racial otherness--the American Indian, the Orient of the Crusades--to produce other primitivisms.<sup>10</sup> As a result, the Pullman porter certainly embodies racial otherness, but he does so in a fraught and complicated fashion. In the story I examine, his

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<sup>9</sup> One way of understanding the Pullman porter's job is to rid his white clients of the infelicities of possessing a body to the extent possible during a train trip. In this sense, they are agents of intellectual abstraction, facilitating the transportation of a person's essence (their mind and personality) but minimizing the effects of too many bodies in close quarters.

<sup>10</sup> Lemke uses the term "primitive" ironically, acknowledging its racism when used to describe African and African-American aesthetics. I also use it not to argue in any sense that nonwhite art is in any useful sense "primitive," but to index the attitudes and relative position of such aesthetics in relation to a high modernism eager to disavow the contributions of black figures.

black skin represents the epistemologies of the racial other, but the story's details produce the racial other as multifarious.

Understanding the figure of the weird Pullman porter as an important contributor to modernist aesthetics not only reaffirms the cultural significance of the Pullman porter and supplements existing accounts of primitivist modernism, it also stakes a claim for the significance of weird fiction in the origins of high modernism. The term "weird fiction" was popularized by its renowned practitioner H.P. Lovecraft and is generally understood to encompass genres like "fantasy, supernatural horror, nonsupernatural horror, and quasi science fiction" (*The Weird Tale* 6-7). In defining his genre in his 1927 essay "Supernatural Horror in Literature," Lovecraft intently focuses on epistemological questions. He begins the essay, "The oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear, and the oldest and strongest kind of fear is fear of the unknown," and in a famous passage in this essay defines the weird tale by its exploitation of this most essential fear: "The true weird tale has something more than secret murder, bloody bones, or a sheeted form clanking chains according to rule. A certain atmosphere of breathless and unexplainable dread of outer, unknown forces must be present; and there must be a hint, expressed with a seriousness and portentousness becoming its subject, of that most terrible conception of the human brain—a malign and particular suspension or defeat of those fixed laws of Nature which are our only safeguard against the assaults of chaos and the daemons of unplumbed space." For Lovecraft, it is this epistemological failure, this inability for the human mind to comprehend events that do not fit into our knowledge systems that is the source of the fear produced by weird fiction. He emphasizes the presence of "outer, unknown forces" and identifies the "most terrible conception of the human brain" as the realization that our scientific

models have failed us, that “those fixed laws of Nature” might face “suspension or defeat.” It is not the supernatural so much as the failure of science to encompass the vast cosmos, indifferent to human concerns, that characterizes the weird tale. As S. T. Joshi points out, it would be a mistake to read Lovecraft as concerned with the supernatural. Lovecraft was a believer in “mechanistic materialism, “the belief that the universe is a ‘mechanism’ operating according to fixed laws (although these may not all be known to human beings)” (“Introduction” xiv). In other words, what might appear to readers to be supernatural events represented in Lovecraft’s fiction is “the ‘supernormal’; that is, the incidents portrayed in his later tales no longer defy natural law, but merely our imperfect *conceptions* of natural law” (“Introduction” xvi). This means that the weird tale is not a critique of the scientific perspective of modernity or the reasoned discourses of the Eminent Scientist as represented in the Shoup story so much as a critique of the idea that these discourses can ever be comprehensive. Lovecraft’s project is concerned not so much with sewing doubt about the power of science itself so much as sewing pessimism about the power of humanity to understand or use science in ways that are likely to improve humanity’s lot. The pessimism of Lovecraft’s mechanistic materialism is hard to distinguish from modernist pessimism about civilization and technology and its impact on human experience, especially in the wake of WWI. The weird Pullman porter, as a possessor and conduit of knowledge inaccessible to science therefore becomes legible as an instrumental figure in modernist critiques of the progressive potential of science and technology.

The Pullman porter in fiction responds to many of the demands that shaped the historical Pullman porter. Above all, they needed to be machinelike in both their competence and in their anonymity. To avoid the sense that they might judge the behavior of white railroad customers,

they had to become “invisible men.” Indeed, art, when it portrayed Pullman porters at all, placed them in the literal and figurative margins. Yet the weird Pullman porter, the possessor and conduit of weird knowledge, reframes this marginalization as a figure of the limits of science. The weird Pullman porter participates in a tradition of antimodern critique that eventually becomes assimilated into primitivist modernism. The epistemological concerns of the weird fiction tale map onto modernism’s pessimism about science, which begins to expose high modernism’s debts to popular fiction. In a broader sense, the weird Pullman porter is an exemplar of the mutually imbricated attraction to and repulsion from liminality that is a central concern of modernist art.

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