"Taste It!"

American Advertising, Ethnicity, and the Rhetoric of Nationhood in the 1920s

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Abstract

This essay explores the analogies between the apparently most controversial discourses of consumer culture and ethnicity in the 1920s. In both discourses, the imagery of commemoration is of focal importance, and both shift from personal recollection to collective memory and ultimately evoke sensuous experience as an ideal and all-inclusive approach to a national/ethnic past. By emphasizing sensation over reflection and ephiphany over personal experience, both discourses subtly devaluate the need for individual recollection, replacing an actual past with its mythical image, an image which eventually renders personal experience superfluous - so that forgetting the actual past becomes a prerequisite for a 'true' memory of national/ethnic values.

At some time between 1880 and 1920, it seems, the American nation collapsed. Rapidly increasing immigration rates brought about the ghettoization of the cities, processes of professional specialization and the consecutive devaluation of unskilled labor consolidated economic and class differences, and new cultural hierarchies emerged which transfixed the distinctive realms of 'popular' and 'high' culture and their respective audiences. Fragmentized and segregated, the glorious American nation was no longer; it became a nostalgic recollection rather than a reassuring and safeguarding social reality.

Of course, as scholars from Lawrence Levine to David Theo Goldberg have shown, the very idea of a (waning) monocultural national tradition is a construction of precisely this period, so that indeed the glorious national past turns out to have been created in the very process of nostalgic revision.[1] The much acclaimed need for collective remembrance consequently epitomizes a new desire for national unity and cultural homogeneity rather than an actual resurrection of past ideals and values. The specific

1 For a delineation of this construction of cultural identity cf. Lawrence W. Levine, Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1988); Berndt Ostendorf, "Einleitung," Amerikanische Ghettoliteratur: Zur Literatur ethnischer, marginaler und unterdrückter Gruppen in Amerika, ed. Berndt Ostendorf (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1983) 1-26; T. J. Jackson Lears, No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880-1920 (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981); Michael North, The Dialect of Modernism: Race, Language, and Twentieth-Century Literature (New York: Oxford UP, 1994); Werner Sollors, Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent in American Culture (New York: Oxford UP, 1986); Heinz Ickstadt, "Trans-national Democracy and Anglo-Saxondom: Fears and Visions of a Dominant Minority in the 1920's," Ethnic Cultures in the 1920's in North America, ed. Wolfgang Binder (Frankfurt/Main: Peter Lang, 1993) 1-16; David Theo Goldberg, "Introduction: Multicultural Conditions," Multiculturalism: A Critical Reader, ed. David Theo Goldberg (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994) 1-41.

structures of this new rhetoric of nationhood are exemplarily pertinent in advertisement strategies of the day which intricately and almost imperceptibly interrelate the imagery of national identity with the imagery of consumption, as I will show. As the need for collective remembrance is not only felt in the realm of mainstream culture, however, but suffuses the ethnic cultures of the period likewise, analogous rhetorical and conceptual structures can be made out in the (marginalized) discourses of ethnicity and the (mainstream) discourses of consumer culture, analogies which I will gauge here to map out discursive commonalities and differences.

I.

When Leo Spitzer set out in 1949 to analyze a Sunkist orange juice ad, he declared this project "the first avenue (a 'philological' avenue) leading toward the understanding of the unwritten text of the American way of life."[2] It was an unconventional project in more than one respect. Applying his explication de texte to an advertisement, Spitzer tackled a discursive field that hitherto had been denied the status of an aesthetic formation altogether, and moreover presented it as a "highly poetic procedure" (AA 252), comparable if not in greatness then in impact to the master pieces of the past. Advertisements, Spitzer concluded, provide a "fulfillment of the aesthetic desires of modern humanity" (AA 249, note 2) and thus depict in nucleo the "national ideal" (AA 276): "[The advertisement] offers ... a 'text' in which we can read, as wellin its words as in its literary and pictorial devices, the spirit of our time and of our nation - which are, surely, in their way, 'unmittelbar zu Gott'" (AA 250).[3]

In the following decades, cultural analyses time and again approached the question how the interrelation of popular cultural texts like advertisements and the 'cultural whole' should be conceived of and dealt with: does advertising really draw upon a given 'national ideal' or does it not rather create this ideal in the first place? While Spitzer had argued that popular culture had the capacity to capture and circulate dominant ideological stances and social norms, to express a given ideology, Roland Barthes some years later radicalized this thought when he depicted modern myths as a strategy of 'naturalizing' an ideological stance and hence making it self-explanatory:

> The sense [of the myth] is already complete, it postulates knowledge, a past, a memory, a comparative order of facts, ideas and decisions. Becoming form, the sense loses its arbitrary quality; it is drained, impoverished, its history disappears, only the letter remains.[4]

2 Leo Spitzer, "American Advertising Explained as Popular Art" (1949), Essays on English and American Literature, ed. Anna Hatcher, rev. ed. (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1962) 249, note 3. Hereafter quoted in the text as AA.

3 Brook Thomas called Spitzer's notion of advertising as a 'part' representing a cultural 'whole' "synecdochal," criticizing the totalizing implications of similar approaches of today, without however diminishing the historical significance of Spitzer's effort to expand the field of aesthetic analysis (Brook Thomas, "Fair Warning," The New Historicism and Other Old-Fashioned Topics [Princeton: Princeton UP, 1991] 8-10).

4 Roland Barthes, Mythologies (Paris: Edition du Seuil, 1957) 224 (my translation). See also James Hay, "Advertising as a Cultural Text (Rethinking Message Analysis in a Recombinant Culture)," Rethinking Communication, vol. 2.: Paradigm Exemplars, ed. B. Dervin et al. (Newbury Park: Sage Publications, 1989) 129-52.

In this view, advertising as the most perfect of modern myths does not draw upon a given ideological context so much as constitute it, in that it is ideally devoid of any surplus meaning and socio-cultural referent. By dint of this logic, advertising does not work via memory but as memory. It does not draw upon a national ideal, it is the national ideal.

It is worthwhile to cast a closer look on the structure of this 'mnemonic function' of advertising, as Roland Barthes's analysis mentions this aspect only cursorily. I am interested in the act of totalization performed by advertising: advertising aims at a total dislocation of the past, evoking its complete restitution in the present symbolic enactment and declaring personal experience superfluous and individual sensation universally committing. In a continuous denial of its own fragmentarity and arbitrariness, advertising poses as an immediate, natural and mythical memory rather than a mediating, functional and exchangeable message.[5] I will delineate this curious strategy of dislocation in a reading of an advertisement for Pall Mall cigarettes published in 1920 by dint of recent theoretical approaches to the notion of cultural memory.

Formally, the Pall Mall Rounds ad presents the typical features of an advertisement of the day. Combining rhymed and prose passages, anecdote and exposition, it does without pictorial elements on the whole. In a first - rhymed - passage, a little story is told about Captain X, who came to cherish the easy availability of round cigarettes during the War,[6] a second - prose - passage draws the conclusion from this story,[7] and

5 In his recent pervasive reflection on the cultural history of advertising, Jackson Lears called advertisements "commercial fables - stories . . . that have reconfigured ancient dreams of abundance to fit the modern world of goods." Like fables, advertisements do contain easily discernible 'messages,' yet this didactic purpose is intricately woven into a discourse which, due to the logic of consumer culture (the logic of "abundance"), promises always more than the message puts forth, functioning as a myth in the Barthesian sense - taking over functions of the cultural memory as I will show. In contrast to Lears, however, I understand advertising as complient with (rather than radically different from) institutionalized forms of 'commemoration.' While Lears distinguishes between the "throwaway culture promoted by modern advertising" and a "gift culture" as represented by institutions like the modern art museum, I argue that advertising, just like the art museum, adopts a rhetoric of priceless, timeless values, and that the art museum, just like advertising, is based upon a logic of commercial evaluation and commodification. Cf. Jackson Lears, Fables of Abundance: A Cultural History of Advertising in America (New York: Basic Books, 1994) 2, 6.

6 "When you wanted a drink of water and couldn't get it / When the chow was cold or hadn't come up / When life was dreary and rain-soaked, too / You had one friend that never failed you" ("Pall Mall Famous Cigarettes," The New York Times 8 Jan. 1920: 19).

7 "That soothing, comforting standby - a cigarette - and the popular cigarettes over there were round and smoked freely. When Captain X found he couldn't replenish his supply of Pall Mall (plain ends) in the field, he began smoking the popular round cigarettes - Their shape gave him an idea.

Back in America once more the Captain came and gave us his idea, - a big idea. He suggested that we make Pall Mall cigarettes round in shape, loosely rolled - a cigarette that does not have to be tapped, squeezed or loosened, a cigarette with a free and easy draught.

A cigarette made from the famous Pall Mall blend of 42 Turkish tobaccos chosen for richness and delicacy of flavor.

In the new foil package with a patented opening tab. "

a visually detached tiny third passage seems to evaluate and extend the information given for the individual reader.[8]

Thus, the ad adopts two different, at first sight almost incompatible marketing strategies of the day; while for once complying with the so-called 'reason-why' technique (i.e., giving a (pseudo-)explanation for the special value und unique significance of the promoted product),[9] it draws simultaneously upon the notion of the consumer as a creature easily manipulable by way of sentimental cultural clichés: mythic constellations like the Old South, the Wild West, the First World War pervade contemporary advertising.[10] This strategy of a 'psychological sentimentalization' is epitomized, for instance, in one of the most famous car ads of the Twenties for the Jordan Playboy, first run in 1923, which in line with Wild West and rural life nostalgia evokes a place "Somewhere West of Laramie," coming complete with horse, saddle, romance, and wild country lass. In an analysis of this ad, Stephen Fox read it as an allusion to the War, as he thought it to reflect the vague addresses given on war correspondence ("somewhere in France"), so that, in his reading, this ad, too, "raised sentimental memories from the World War."[11] Be that as it may, West nostalgia or War recollection or both, I will argue that the sentimental memories in this and other ads of the day are not so much 'raised' as displaced, not so much uncovered as submerged and replaced with other experiences, as a closer look at the Pall Mall ad will show.

The soldier represented by the ad is in a pretty desolate position: being alone in the field with many unquenchable needs, the only thing he can come up with is a round cigarette, which consequently serves as a "friend" in his "dreary and rain-soaked" life. It is the cigarette's "free and easy" availability, rather than the sentimental value, that is commented upon in the 'reason-why' passage - the soldier's experience of an easy smoke is adopted by Pall Mall on behalf of everybody. Yet the detached passage next to the copy introduces a strange twist in the argument: "If you were in 'the field,' Pall Mall Rounds will bring back memories. If you were not, they will be a revelation." The following structure is given:

1 Smoking in the field was a means of forgetting the desolate conditions of the War and of bringing back the conditions of ordinary life.
2 Smoking the same kind of cigarettes in America brings back the memories of 'the field.'

8 Underneath the Pall Mall logo, this detached passage reads: "If you were in 'the field' Pall Mall Rounds will bring back memories. If you were not, they will be a revelation."

9 John E. Kennedy, the famous copy writer of the agency Lord & Thomas who 'invented' 'reason-why/ emphasized its almost irresistible strategy of persuasion by employing a rhetoric of simple (to simplistic) common sense: "True 'Reason-Why' Copy is logic, plus persuasion, plus conviction, all woven into a certain simplicity of thought - predigested for the average mind, so that it is easier to understand than to misunderstand it" (quoted in Stephen Fox, The Mirror Makers: A History of American Advertising and Its Creators [New York: William Morrow, 1984] 50). See also Lears, Fables of Abundance 198-99.

10 For this strategy and its interrelations with 'reason-why,' see T. J. Jackson Lears, "From Salvation to Self-Realization: Advertising and the Therapeutic Roots of the Consumer Culture, 1880-1930," The Culture of Consumption: Critical Essays in American History, 1880-1980, ed. R. Wightman Fox and T. J. J. Lears (New York: Pantheon Books, 1983) 1-38; 18.

11 Fox 96.

3 Smoking Pall Mall Rounds creates something that can serve as a compensation for not having experienced 4he field' in the first place, i.e., a revelation.

This ad does not even try to gloss over the fact that the memories evoked are not relevant per se but serve only as templates for a common experience that can just as well be derived from smoking a certain kind of cigarette. It is the simple act of smoking Pall Mall Rounds that is enacted in the ad as epiphanic experience which renders 'the field' a site of nostalgic quality and the 'sentimental memories from the World War' a universally available experience, canceling actual recollections of the War, recollections of dirt, pain, humiliation, and fear, and replacing them with the vague imagery of heroic individualism and lonesome manhood. Thus, while on a first level this advertisement, like many others of the day, introduces an almost Proustian notion of recollection as involuntary and sensuous experience (the taste of a petite madeleine releasing involuntary, instantaneous and ecstatic memories), on a second level this structure is subtly reversed, as the sensuous experience (of smoking, driving, or tasting) need no longer have any specific reference. While in Proust's A la recherche du temps perdu a distinct and deeply personal experience of the past motivates the present sensuous epiphany, in the Pall Mall Rounds ad the present experience of consumption is eventually depicted as all there is, as the brand of cigarette (and thus allegedly the taste) is not even the same one in and after the War.

II.

To get a grasp on the workings of advertising as cultural memory, we need to gauge this a-historical notion of the past which clearly differs from the objective historical and the subjective psychological (Proustian) effort at reconstructing or re-collecting the past. Pierre Nora, in his reflections on memory and history, distinguishes between memory as a "perpetually actual phenomenon, a bond tying us to the eternal present . . . affective and magical, [which] only accommodates those facts that suit it," and history as "the reconstruction, always problematic and incomplete, of what is no longer . . . , [which] because it is an intellectual and secular production, calls for analysis and criticism."[12] For Nora, the very effort at approaching the phenomenon of memory theoretically and systematically points to its transformation and eventual disruption: ". . . memory disappears, surviving only as a reconstituted object beneath the gaze of critical history" (LM 12). 'Absorbed' by the archive, "living memory" turns into "a secondary memory, a prosthesis-memory" (LM 14). By dint of this definition, curiously enough, advertising in its willful adaptation and transformation of past 'facts' seems to be the one remaining modern discourse to carry the flag of what Nora calls "collectively remembered values" (LM 7).[13] Indeed, advertising questions Nora's rigid

12 Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire" trans. M. Roudebush, Representations 26 (Spring 1989): 7-25; 8. Hereafter cited in the text as LM.

13 Of course, Nora, who conceives of the twentieth-century "movement toward democratization and mass culture" as bringing about a "fundamental collapse of memory," (LM 7) would not agree to my - admittedly polemical - reading of his model. In Nora's terminology, advertising - like any other popular cultural text - would most certainly pertain to the realm of 'the sub-

distinctions, as for once it doubtlessly performs a deeply "intellectual and secular production" (and thus proceeds analogous to history), yet at the same time posits a committing and mythical sign system which is in its effect very well comparable to a ritualized and standardized mnemonic tradition.

An alternative to the oppositional framework of 'history' and 'memory' might be found in Jan Assmann's concept of cultural memory as distinct from a Halbwachsian collective or - in Assmann's terminology - "communicative" memory.[14] While Maurice Halbwachs emphasized - just like Pierre Nora - the significance of personal experience and group interest for the erection of a system of collective memory, and consigned standardized and organized versions of cultural communication to the realm of history, Assmann conceives of "objectivized culture and organized, or ceremonialized communication" (KG 11) as of functional entities which, in close analogy to the workings of everyday "communicative" memory, constitute intricate networks of group identity or consciousness - a "cultural memory." This cultural memory, forming an intermediate realm between "communicative memory" and "history," harbors a "stock of disposable texts, images and rites, the 'maintenance' of which stabilizes and mediates the cultural self-conception" (KG 15).

Of course, it is precisely the notion of 'standardization' and 'mediation' that has been declared to motivate modern consumer culture. Thus, Roland Barthes pointed out the pertinence of "'normalized' forms," providing a disposable "catalogue of collective images" which is as universal as it is impenetrable for a "bourgeois culture of pure consumption."[15] Whereas Assmann - without mentioning consumer culture - conceives of standardized images and notions as of potentially creative and constructive sources of cultural imagination and self-fashioning, most approaches to consumer culture tended to stress the conditioning and petrifying impact of a standardized cultural imagery. Thus, referring to the fashionable magazines which "[d]uring the span of the Progressive era . . . achieved a centrality in American life never duplicated before or since," Christopher P. Wilson remarks:

> One might say the new magazines were a bit like Coney Island. . . . like their amusement park counterpart, underneath lurked the 'reality of control/ a world of manipulated responses and 'pageants' that invited passivity and anomie.

Uncovering underlying "efforts to streamline and manage the reading process," Wilson makes out a purely negative totalitarian impulse leaving no space for personal imagination and digressing interpretations of culture.[16] In view of the notion of cul-

jective,' and thus constitute another instance of the "wholesale preoccupation with the individual psychology of remembering," (LM 15) as he does not take into consideration the possibility of a constructive transformation of cultural memory, accomplishing a communal restitution rather than collapse.

14 Jan Assmann, "Kollektives Gedächtnis und kulturelle Identität," Kultur und Gedächtnis, ed. Jan Assmann and Tonio Hölscher (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1988) 9-19. Hereafter cited in the text as KG. See also Maurice Halbwachs, La mémoire collective, posthumous ed. (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1950).

15 Barthes 249, 250 (my translation).

16 Christopher P. Wilson, "The Rhetoric of Consumption: Mass-Market Magazines and the Demise of the Gentle Reader, 1880-1920," The Culture of Consumption 42, 61, 63.

tural memory, this purely deterministic understanding of the function of consumer culture should be reconsidered.

After all, in the United States of the early twentieth century, advertising, just like popular magazines, had a difficult task to perform since the cultural tradition evoked had to be explained in the first place. In view of the manifold ethnic and social groups with diverse value systems, different cultural memories and mostly vague ideas about their specific role in the U.S.A., the often-praised symbolic framework of the 'national ideal(s)' has to appear unlikely at best. If advertising thus wanted to draw upon an idea of national identity, it had to create it in the first place. In opposition to the cumbersome projects of education, political participation, and social welfare, advertisements established a referential framework on the basis of habit instead of knowledge or experience: American lifestyle took over the task to define American identity. An advertisement campaign for the The Minneapolis Journal in 1920 epitomizes this rhetoric of national identity via lifestyle:

> Looking out over this country of ours, the observer is impressed with what James Bryce called 'the pleasant uniformity of American life.' Here, amid a multitude of opportunities, purposes and interests, obtains a striking unity of ideal, customs and thought. This is not a hundred million individuals, but a nation on the march towards its destiny.[17]

Over and over again, it is the act of consumption that is made out to be at the core of this 'striking unity' of the nation.

This idea of the unifying and universalizing function of lifestyle is deeply entrenched with the idea of sensuous experience as a committing and de-personalizing phenomenon: whoever smokes Pall Mall Rounds tastes the same, whoever drives a Jordan Playboy feels the same, and whoever watches a Sept movie sees exactly the same as everybody else - ". . . the stay-at-homes are having as good a time as the travelers. They throw the Sept movies on the screen at home and see exactly what the travelers have seen - real motion pictures full of action in strange places"[18] - a sensation which eventually renders the category of personal experience (of the War, the West, or of Europe) doubtful and insecure.

Cultural critics and artists of the period watched this 'drainage' of the real and personal with a skeptical eye. The term standardization acquires starkly negative connotations when authors as diverse as Sinclair Lewis and Langston Hughes paint the dreary picture of a uniform, yet lifeless and empty American mass culture. In Sinclair Lewis's Babbit, Bryce's "pleasant uniformity of American life" threatens the very idea of personal autonomy, individuality and free choice: ". . . the large national advertisers fix[ed] the surface of [Babbit's] life, fix[ed] what he believed to be his individuality."[19] Hughes furthermore makes out African-American folklore as a subcultural counterforce to forego the pervading and leveling mass-cultural status quo:

> [Negro] common people are not afraid of spirituals, as for a long time their more intellecual brethren were, and jazz is their child. They furnish a wealth of colorful, distinctive

17 "The Place of the Newspaper in Modern Life," The New York Times 22 March 1920: 8.
18 "The Sept Motion Picture Camera," The New York Times 1 April 1923: part 5, 6.
19 Sinclair Lewis, Babbitt (1922; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991) 82.

> material for any artist because they still hold their own individuality in the face of American standardizations.[20]

However, the alternative tradition Hughes evokes so powerfully relates to a symbolic framework which basically repeats rather than collapses the structures of mainstream self-fashioning. As Herbert Gans has pointed out, the mass-cultural strategy to neglect the actual, real, and complex tradition in favor of a 'distilled' cultural memory did extend to the emerging ethnic cultures:

> People may even sincerely wish to return to these imagined pasts, which are conveniently cleansed of the complexities that accompanied them in the real past, but while they may soon realize that they cannot go back, they may not surrender the wish. Or else they displace that wish on churches, schools, and the mass media, asking them to recreate a tradition, or rather to create a symbolic tradition . . . .[21]

In turn, what is celebrated as a recovery of the past tradition, in fact accomplishes the task of ethnic self-fashioning in the present. Just like the discourses of consumer culture, the discourses of ethnicity recount "patterns that lend themselves to transformation into symbols and easy practice,"[22] thus enacting nothing but lifestyle. If Langston Hughes enthuses over the power of jazz music to lay bare the "Negro soul," pertaining to a mythical African origin as opposed to the "mold of American standardization,"[23] this origin seems to be completely contained in the music (or rather in the experience of hearing it) - "Hear dat music. ... / Jungle night. / Hear dat music. ... /

20 Langston Hughes, "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" (1926), Crossing the Danger Water: Three Hundred Years of African-American Writing, ed. Deirdre Mullane (New York: Doubleday, 1993) 503-507; 504. Hughes's idea of the artist as 'shaping' and appropriating the 'common folks' vernacular is striking. It is less the actual experience of a cultural practice (jazz) that is deemed precious but its adaptation for a certain aim, i.e., the demarcation of racial identity. This adaptation is shown to be a profoundly artistic process.

21 Herbert J. Gans, "Symbolic Ethnicity: The Future of Ethnic Groups and Cultures in America," On the Making of Americans: Essays in Honor of David J. Riesman, ed. Herbert J. Gans et al. (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1979) 193-220; 204-205.

22 Gans 216. Werner Sollors stressed the legitimacy of a conception of "symbolic ethnicity" by pointing out the problematic consequences of an unreflected pluralistic praise of "purity and monoethnic myths of origin" (Werner Sollors, "A Critique of Pure Pluralism," Reconstructing American Literary History, ed. Sacvan Bercovitch [Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1986] 250-79; 275). Referring to Zora Neale Hurston, Sollors specifically mentions the function of mass culture to constitute a point of reference for ethnic discourse: "[Hurston's] effect of 'authenticity' is achieved not by some purist, archival, or preservationist attitude toward a fixed past but by a remarkable openness toward the ability of a specific idiom to interact with 'outside' signals and to incorporate them. In that way elements of a widely shared everyday life, like a humanized soft drink bottle ["Dat shape you got on you! I bet the Coca Cola Company is paying you good money for the patent"] or a verbalized 'percolator' . . . become 'natural' and even central elements in the vernacular. It is the ethnic text's ability to generate the difference out of a shared cultural context of coffeemakers and Coca Cola bottles that makes this example representative" (Werner Sollors, "Introduction: The Invention of Ethnicity," The Invention of Ethnicity, ed. Werner Sollors [New York: Oxford UP, 1989] xv-xvi). Likewise, William Boelhower reflects upon the specific modernist turn of this ethnic "pseudo-discourse," claiming the issue to be "not ethnicity per se but the uses of ethnicity in a postindustrial society" (William Boelhower, Through a Glass Darkly: Ethnic Semiosis in American Literature [New York: Oxford UP, 1987] 120; see esp. 127-31: "The Citv of Advertisement, the New Status of the Word").

23 Hughes, "The Negro Artist" 503.

And the moon was white"[24] - so that he ultimately echoes rather than eschews the rhetoric of the standardized culture so violently disclaimed elsewhere. The strategies of actually recollecting a personal past or analytically constructing a historical past are suspended and replaced by a universally committing sensuous experience of the present: listening, dancing, feeling. This is not to say, of course, that Langston Hughes inadvertently fell prey to a powerful and all-pervading mainstream culture which prevented, once and for all, the individual effort at ethnic self-fashioning by appropriating it for 'its own' discourse. Rather the fact that the powerful metaphor of 'cultural memory' is enacted in both contexts points to the intricate links between ethnic subculture and mass culture, links that do not create sameness but dialogic difference, as Michael North has shown in his correlation of Euro-American and African-American modernism(s).[25] The forgetting of the past and the future and the immersion into the pure sensuality of the present moment bring about the true memory:

> Sleek black boys in a cabaret.
> Jazz-band, jazz-band, -
> Play, plAY, PLAY!
> Tomorrow.... who knows?
>
> Dance today!
> White girls' eyes
> Call gay black boys.
> Black boys' lips
> Grin jungle joys.
> . . . . . [26]

24 Langston Hughes,"To Midnight Nan at Leroy's," The Weary Blues (1926; New York: Alfred Knopf, 1947) 30.

25 Michael North actually claims the coexistence and interaction of "two different modernisms, tightly linked by their different stakes in the same language [which] emerge between 1922 and 1927. ... it is impossible to understand either modernism without reference to the other, without reference to the language they so uncomfortably shared, and to the political and cultural forces that were constricting that language at the very moment modern writers of both races were attempting in dramatically different ways to free it" (The Dialect of Modernism: Race, Language, and Twentieth-Century Culture [New York: Oxford UP, 1994] 11). Likewise, Kenneth Warren delineated the African-American strategy in the 1920s of assessing African cultures almost exclusively in view of their significance and readability for the United States. Like Eric Sundquist, he noted the African-American enactment of Africa as a psychological space of origin rather than a geographical space of difference - "Africa is where its people are, and going to Africa is going to the self one already knows, Africa is not so much a discovery as a reconfirmation" - and commented upon the representational restrictions inherent to this approach in view of W. E. B. Du Bois and Langston Hughes: "There is nothing new in Africa. . . . Africa is always imagined in retrospect - as the place one has come from - or in a retrospective prospect - as the home one is going to. In either case the contemporary 'reality' of Africa and Africans is largely occluded by retrospective and prospective visions" (Kenneth Warren, "Appeals for (Mis)recognition: Theorizing the Diaspora," Cultures of United States Imperialism, ed. Amy Kaplan and Donald E. Pease [Durham: Duke UP, 1993] 392-406; 393, 394-95). Cf. Eric Sundquist, "The Spell of Africa," To Wake the Nations: Race in the Making of American Literature (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1993) 540-625.

26 Langston Hughes, "Harlem Night Club," The Weary Blues 32.

III.

The rhetorics of consumer culture and the rhetorics of ethnicity come amazingly close in the early twentieth century, both emphasizing sensation over reflection, epiphany over personal experience. One might now push the analogy even further in pointing out that it is less the actual sensuous experience (the sound, the taste, the flavor, the sight) than the textual enacting of this sensuality that provides the desired symbolic framework. After all, Langston Hughes's poetry creates a purely semiotic link between jazz and jungle, cultural practice and ethnic origin, the dense and sensuous imagery of the poems linking both instances inextricably, rendering them one and locating the African past exclusively in the Harlem present. Instead of visiting a Harlem nightclub, one might just as well read Hughes's poetry; in fact the latter experience might very well transcend and exceed the former.

Again, the analogies to the strategies of consumer culture are pertinent. In a correlation of John Dos Passos's U.S.A. with public-relation strategies of the day, William Boelhower pointed out the notion of the linguistic constructedness of reality pervading this period: "The essence of culture is that which is created by the technics of the mass media. There is no longer anything behind the simulacrum: no authentic object or unique and unrepeatable subjectivity." While this doubtlessly holds true, the fearful recognition of the "human subject [being] no longer hampered by a physical body"[27] is countered in advertising just as in Hughes's poetry (if to different aims) by means of the imagery of an immediate and self-referential sensuous impact. Thus, in his The Psychology of Advertising, which appeared as early as 1903, Walter Dill Scott developed a 'reader response' model of advertising, emphasizing its functional rhetorics:

> How many advertisers describe a piano so vividly that the reader can hear it? How many food products are described so that the reader can taste the food? . . . How many describe an undergarment so that the reader can feel the pleasant contact with his body?[28]

Commenting upon this passage, T J. Jackson Lears stressed the emergent surrogate function of advertising which offered "not information, but feeling . . . not a communication, but a thing unto itself."[29] On top of abandoning the notion of information and communication, however, Scott's model relays sensation altogether into the semiotic space of the advertisement. If the desired feeling of wholeness and immediacy lost to the cultural experience is to be transfixed in the advertisement, the consecutive act of purchasing the promoted product turns out to be of secondary importance. Thus potentially, and certainly inadvertently, the advertisement in its totalizing effort tends to subvert its originally purely functional framework.

Another instance of this totalizing tendency and its effacing of the underlying functionality of consumer culture evinces when Bruce Barton, one of the most prominent figures of American advertising in the 1920s, in an essay entitled "Real Pleasures" describes his delight in "walking along Fifth Avenue, looking in the shop windows, and making a mental inventory of the things I don't want." Quoting this passage in Our

27 Boelhower 130, 131.
28 Quoted in Lears, "From Salvation to Self-Realization" 19.
29 Lears, "From Salvation to Self-Realization" 22.

Master's Voice, James Rorty presented it as "sheer heresy" coming "from the head of one of America's largest advertising agencies."[30] I, however, regard it as the logical conclusion of a consumer culture which eventually conceives of the semiotic space as of an all-comprising and autoreferential entity - the cultural memory itself, instead of a depiction of cultural memories.

By effacing the actual experience and the historical past, the text of the advertisement epitomizes and thus constitutes nationhood just as Hughes's poetry epitomizes and constitutes ethnic identity. The strategies of a consumer culture which promises sensuality and immediacy at the cost of personal experience relate to the rhetoric of nationhood especially in the 1920s which dwells upon the notion of an immediate 'belonging' and the total subsumption of the individual to the national; both rhetorical patterns forming a dense and indissoluble symbolical network. I have argued above that the consumer culture rests upon the strategy of forgetting or blotting out the actual in order to highlight the universally committing experience. As Homi K. Bhabha has shown, the rhetoric of nationhood adopts this move of abstracting from the personal, painful, or embarrassing actual past (and recollection), concentrating instead on 'essential' symbolical traditions which are discursively constructed:

> It is through [the] syntax of forgetting - or being obliged to forget - that the problematic identification of a national people becomes visible. The national subject is produced in that place where the daily plebiscite - the unitary number - circulates the grand narrative of the will. However, the equivalence of will and plebiscite, the identity of part and whole, past and present, is cut across by the 'obligation to forget,' or forgetting to remember. This is again the moment of anteriority of the nation's sign that entirely changes our understanding of the pastness of the past, and the unified present of the will to nationhood. ... To be obliged to forget - in the construction of the national present - is not a question of historical memory; it is the construction of a discourse on society that performs the problematic totalization of the national will. That strange time - forgetting to remember - is a place of 'partial identification' inscribed in the daily plebiscite which represents the performative discourse of the people.[31]

Apart from its pertinence for the process of 'dissemiNation,' the paradoxical instance of the "forgetting to remember" might be considered the focal element of an aesthetics of consumer culture which eventually endangered in its totalizing tendencies its very foundations (efficiency, applicability). As I intended to show by way of a correlation with poetry, this strategy need not be conceived of as an exclusively negative act of repression and imposture. Both in respect of nationhood and consumer culture, the totalizing strategies are liable to be broken up again, to be worked upon in their popular reception which invariably privileges certain aspects and discards others, which selects and and thus unhinges discursive closure, constantly taking new stances which in turn pose as natural, immediate and closed mnemonic systems. Just because a discourse poses as monolithic and immediate, as does advertising in the 1920s, it need not be received that way, and the popular reception of advertising certainly testifies to a widespread dynamics of practical adaptation and transformation which silently confirms and subverts the all-pervading consumer-cultural 'power.'

30 James Rorty, Our Master's Voice: Advertising (1934; New York: Arno Press, 1976) 328.
31 Homi K. Bhabha, DissemiNation: lime, Narrative, and the Margins of the Modern Nation, Nation and Narration, ed. Homi K. Bhabha (London: Routledge, 1990) 310-11.