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Imperial Mimicry and Racial Regression in Eugene O'Neill's *The Emperor Jones*

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ABSTRACT: This paper reads Eugene O'Neill's *The Emperor Jones* (1920) as an expressionist drama that organizes Black Atlantic history through staged regression. Moving beyond interpretations that treat the forest flight as either psychological breakdown or modernist primitivism, it argues that the play structures Jones's movement through penal discipline, slave commodification, the Middle Passage, and ritual sacrifice as a historically sequenced process. Expressionist devices such as monologue, rhythmic intensification, distorted space, and recurrent sound transform fear into a theatrical encounter with racial history, rendering Atlantic modernity visible on stage. Drawing on W. E. B. Du Bois's concept of double consciousness, Homi K. Bhabha's account of colonial mimicry, and Paul Gilroy's theorization of the Black Atlantic, the paper examines how divided subjectivity and imperial performance emerge from transatlantic histories of slavery and empire. It further argues that Jones's rule over Afro-Caribbean subjects reveals a diasporic form of internal colonialism in which imperial relations circulate within Black Atlantic space. The final section considers the witch-doctor ritual as a site where collective racial memory intersects with modernist primitivism, exposing both the critical force and the representational limit of O'Neill's modernism. The paper ultimately suggests that American expressionism in *The Emperor Jones* is inseparable from the histories of racial violence that it organizes, stages, and renders audible.

Key Words: *The Emperor Jones*, Expressionism, Imperial Mimicry, Double Consciousness, Black Atlantic

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I. Introduction

Eugene O'Neill's *The Emperor Jones* (1920) occupies a pivotal position in the emergence of American dramatic modernism. Widely recognized as one of the earliest sustained experiments in expressionist technique on the American stage, the play has also generated persistent debate concerning racial representation and imperial ideology. Despite extensive scholarly engagement, critical interpretations remain methodologically compartmentalized. Existing scholarship tends to isolate formal innovation, racial representation, and imperial politics without sufficiently examining how expressionist form organizes racial and colonial history.

Formalist critics emphasize O'Neill's departure from naturalism and his development of symbolic dramaturgy. Robert F. Whitman situates *The Emperor Jones* within O'Neill's search for "a 'new language for O'Neill'" (154), arguing that it is through his "experimental techniques" that O'Neill conveys "destructive inner conflicts" (159). Travis Bogard likewise interprets the forest sequence as a rigorously organized descent into psychological crisis, underscoring the rhythmic intensification of the tom-tom and the formal coherence of regression (143). These readings convincingly establish the play's technical sophistication and its importance within the genealogy of American expressionism, yet by framing regression primarily as psychological disintegration, they privilege interior alienation over historical formation and thereby risk detaching theatrical form from the racial and imperial histories that shape it. Unlike Bogard, however, this study argues that formal coherence derives not from the organization of psychological crisis alone but from the sequencing of historically distinct regimes of racial domination.

A second critical trajectory focuses on racial representation. Michèle

Mendelssohn examines the instability of racial identity in Jones's appropriation of "white quality talk" (21), arguing that linguistic performance unsettles essentialist conceptions of race (20-23). This analysis clarifies the play's ambivalent engagement with modernist primitivism and racial stereotype, particularly in its portrayal of Jones as both subject and object of racial discourse. At the same time, discussions of representational ethics often pay less attention to the temporal and historical sequencing that organizes the forest regression itself.

A third line of inquiry situates the drama within imperial politics. Joel Pfister contends that O'Neill sees Brutus Jones as a person whose "subjectivity has been structured by history and partly colonized by the ideologies of American racism" (135), and further argues that the play displaces white imperial violence onto intra-Black conflict. In this reading, Jones's island sovereignty mirrors the theatrical logic of colonial authority. Such approaches productively foreground imperial discourse, yet they often treat the forest episodes as symbolic allegory rather than as a historically sequenced structure of racial formation.

Existing scholarship has therefore not fully explained how expressionist form itself organizes racial and imperial history within the play's structure. Regression in *The Emperor Jones* is neither simply psychological collapse nor abstract primitivist symbolism. Rather, the forest sequence may be understood as a patterned traversal of Atlantic racial formation, one that moves through distinct but connected phases of Black subjection. This study departs from previous scholarship by demonstrating that regression in *The Emperor Jones* is not merely a thematic device but a formal principle embedded within expressionist design. More specifically, the play stages regression as a dramaturgical movement through sedimented formations of Black subjection—

industrial labor discipline, penal confinement, slave commodification, the Middle Passage, and sacrificial ritual. Regression here does not denote a nostalgic return to a mythic primitive origin; rather, it designates a dramatic traversal of racial history through which Atlantic modernity becomes theatrically visible. In this sense, expressionist technique operates not simply as aesthetic experimentation but as a mechanism that renders visible how imperial sovereignty, founded upon imitation of whiteness, becomes unstable over time.

This argument is informed by W. E. B. Du Bois's formulation of "double consciousness," defined as the condition of "two souls, two thoughts" divided within a single body (5). It further engages Homi K. Bhabha's account of colonial "mimicry," wherein the colonized subject becomes "almost the same, but not quite," a resemblance that simultaneously authorizes and destabilizes power (86). Finally, Paul Gilroy's concept of the "Black Atlantic" locates racial identity within transoceanic histories of slavery and empire rather than within stable national frameworks (4-6), providing the historical horizon within which both double consciousness and mimicry emerge.

Rather than serving as equal explanatory centers, these frameworks function here as supporting lenses: Du Bois clarifies divided self-perception, Bhabha explains performative resemblance to imperial authority, and Gilroy situates that performance within a transatlantic history of slavery and empire.

Conceptually, the argument proceeds through a series of related but distinct levels of analysis. Historical sequencing functions as the paper's primary formal principle, describing the expressionist organization of racial history through staged regression. Within that formal structure, double consciousness explains Jones's divided subjectivity, while imperial mimicry accounts for his attempt to stabilize that division through the performance of sovereignty. The Black Atlantic provides the historical horizon within which both subjectivity and

mimicry emerge, locating Jones's experience within transatlantic histories of slavery and empire. Finally, diasporic internal colonialism describes the political order produced when mimicry is translated into governance. These concepts therefore operate not as competing explanations but as interconnected levels through which the play links dramatic form, subject formation, and imperial power.

By historical sequencing, this paper does not mean the recovery of historical background external to the play. Rather, it refers to the formal arrangement of successive historical formations within dramatic structure itself, so that history appears not as context but as staged sequence. The forest sequence, therefore, does not merely stage Jones's terror or psychic collapse. It organizes Jones's backward movement into a series of recognizable historical scenes. As the action moves from labor discipline to penal confinement, slave commodification, and forced migration, expressionist form makes that history visible on stage. The main claim of this paper is that O'Neill uses regression as a dramatic structure through which Black Atlantic history becomes theatrically legible.

II. Expressionist Regression and Historical Sequencing

O'Neill's use of expressionism must be situated within early twentieth-century theatrical modernism. Expressionism sought to externalize interior states, collapsing distinctions between subjective perception and objective reality. Rather than reproducing mimetic environments, expressionist dramaturgy deforms space and intensifies gesture to render psychic experience visible. In *The Emperor Jones*, however, expressionism exceeds psychological interiority; it

becomes a strategy for staging history. The deformation of space does not merely visualize fear but links Jones's panic to specific histories of labor, punishment, and enslavement. The forest is not simply Jones's mind externalized but a spatial archive in which collective racial memory is arranged for the audience. Interior collapse becomes historical return.

Scene One is set in Jones's palace; the remaining scenes unfold in or at the edge of the forest. The temporal progression—from afternoon to twilight, deep night, and finally early morning—corresponds to an inward movement that is also temporal. Six forest scenes unfold increasingly as monologue, so that geography gives way to an interior yet historically saturated performance space. The dramatic movement stages passage from imperial spectacle to historical exposure.

Jones's appearance in Scene One—"typically negroid, yet there is something decidedly distinctive about his face" (10-11)—signals a sovereignty constructed through visual display. His costume materializes this authority: "He wears a light-blue uniform coat, sprayed with brass buttons, heavy gold chevrons on his shoulders, gold braid on the collar, cuffs, etc. His pants are bright red, with a light-blue stripe down the side. Patent leather laced boots with brass spurs, and a belt with a long-barreled, pearl-handled revolver in a holster, complete his make-up" (11).

The costume functions as theatrical armor. Authority is produced through spectacle; sovereignty persists only while performance holds. The "Great Forest" (29) marks the shift from spectacle to interiorization. Outside lies social identity; within, psychic and historical layers collapse. The tom-tom rhythm mirrors Jones's heartbeat, and the "Little Formless Fears" (32) signal suppressed anxiety. Yet the forest does more than register panic. It reorganizes dramatic space so that movement inward also becomes movement backward through

historical time.

Crucially, spatial penetration initiates temporal regression. The deeper Jones travels, the further he is pushed backward in time. What first appears as panic gradually reveals itself as patterned recurrence governed by the play's staging choices. The Little Formless Fear marks the first rupture. At the end of Scene Two, Jones fires: "He fires. There is a flash, a loud report, then silence, broken only by the far-off quickened throb of the tom-tom. The formless creatures have scurried back into the forest" (33). The gunshot exposes fragility beneath imperial display. Although he "addresses himself with renewed confidence" (33), successive apparitions return him to coercive racial formations. Hallucination becomes historical sequencing. The apparitions function less as psychological symptoms than as staged historical formations that progressively reorganize Jones's relation to time.

Scene Three begins the erosion of imperial identity not simply at the level of plot, but at the level of theatrical texture. Jones's attire disintegrates—"[h]e has lost his Panama hat. [h]is face is scratched, his brilliant uniform shows several large rents" (35)—and the stage direction places visual damage before any explanatory reflection. The effect is cumulative: the costume no longer guarantees coherence, and authority starts to fray as surface. Jeff, a Pullman porter, appears "throwing a pair of dice. . . with the regular, rigid, mechanical movements of an automaton" (34-35). The insistence on "regular," "rigid," and "mechanical" is crucial because it makes labor visible as bodily discipline. Rather than functioning as a mere memory image, Jeff embodies a regime of industrial repetition in which Black labor is rendered automatic, routinized, and depersonalized. The scene therefore introduces regression through a diction of mechanization that links Jones's present panic to a prior history of racialized labor control.

Scene Four intensifies this logic of discipline through repetition and formal echo. The "road glimmers ghastly and unreal" (37), but the scene's unreality does not sever it from history; it renders coercive labor newly visible as structure. The chain gang is staged through a nearly duplicated vocabulary of mechanization:

> (The prison guard cracks his whip—noiselessly—and at that signal all the convicts start to work on the road. [. . .] Their movements, like those of Jeff in the preceding scene, are those of *automatons*—rigid, slow, and mechanical. The prison guard points sternly at Jones with his whip, motions him to take his place among the other shovelers, Jones gets to his feet in a hypnotized stupor. He mumbles subserviently.)
>
> Yes, suh! Yes, suh! I'se comin'! (39-40, emphasis added)

By repeating the key descriptor from the previous tableau, O'Neill binds wage labor to penal labor within a continuous disciplinary grammar. The syntax of the stage direction is equally important: command follows command, gesture follows gesture, and Jones is incorporated into the chain gang before he can narratively master the scene. His response—"Yes, suh! Yes, suh! I'se comin'!"—marks the abrupt contraction of imperial speech into compelled obedience. What collapses here is not simply confidence, but the very linguistic performance of sovereignty that had sustained the emperor's earlier authority.

By Scene Five, regression is explicitly historical, but the scene's force lies in the way history is staged as bodily reduction. Jones's clothing deteriorates—"His pants are in tatters, his shoes cut and misshapen, flapping about his feet" (41)—and the visual fragmentation of the body precedes the auction tableau in which he appears "cowering, paralyzed with horror" (44). The auction scene does not merely allude to slavery; it restages commodification as a theatrical

stripping of personhood. The stage direction places Jones before the auction block not as an autonomous subject but as a body exposed to valuation and exchange. What is dramatized here is less individual memory than the reduction of human identity to marketable property. Regression becomes legible here as structural reenactment: Jones is not remembering an event he once lived, but being repositioned within a historical regime that precedes and exceeds his individual biography.

Scene Six descends into the Middle Passage, where the argument about historical sequencing reaches its most decisive point. Jones clings to his final silver bullet—"If I shoots dat one I'm a goner sho'!" (45)—while reduced to "no better than a breech cloth" (46). The scene strips him simultaneously of costume, technological assurance, and imperial posture. What remains is not a recovered origin but an enforced confrontation with the foundational rupture of Black Atlantic modernity: forced displacement, commodification, and the violent making of enslaved subjecthood. The Middle Passage sequence therefore functions not only as culmination but as the historical ground that retroactively orders the preceding tableaux.

Through costume disintegration, rhythmic intensification, repeated stage diction, and symbolic sequencing, O'Neill builds a formal pattern in which Jones is pushed through a sequence of historical scenes. The apparitions are not arbitrary hallucinations. They are arranged in temporal order, and that order gives the forest its historical force. The forest becomes a stage space in which earlier forms of racial domination reappear one after another. The order of the apparitions is crucial. Jeff's appearance as a Pullman porter marks Jones's return to industrial wage labor; the chain gang tableau then folds that wage regime back into penal discipline; the auction exposes the plantation market in human bodies; and the Middle Passage scene discloses the transatlantic rupture

that made both wage and slave labor possible in the first place. The forest thus does not juxtapose random images of violence. It pushes Jones through a historically descending scale of racialized labor, from twentieth-century service work to nineteenth-century incarceration, eighteenth-century slavery, and finally to the foundational violence of oceanic transport.

This order is enforced by the play's stage mechanics. Each scene change darkens the lighting, strips away another layer of costume, and reduces the clarity of dialogue while intensifying the drumbeat. As the stage directions repeat and modify the vocabulary of mechanization—"regular, rigid, mechanical" for Jeff and "automatons—rigid, slow, and mechanical" for the chain gang—industrial wage labor and penal labor are bound into a single disciplinary continuum arranged across scenes. By the time Jones reaches the auction and the ship hold, speech has been so compressed that bodily posture, group movement, and sound carry more of the narrative burden than articulated language. The forest sequence therefore produces historicity not by naming history, but by structuring transitions, gestures, and sonic patterns in a way that makes past regimes succeed one another on stage.

If the forest stages historical regression, the silver bullet functions as the material fiction that resists that regression. Unlike the apparitions that emerge from collective memory, the bullet belongs to Jones's modern arsenal and condenses his faith in calculation, singular agency, and technological superiority. It is therefore not merely a weapon within the plot but a prop through which sovereignty is imagined as secure, rational, and personal. The bullet materializes Jones's conviction that modern authority can master uncertainty by converting belief into instrumentality.

The silver bullet first appears not as an object of belief but as a calculated instrument of political rule. Earlier in the play, Smithers recalls that Jones had

spread the story that "only a silver bullet could kill" him (155). The myth functions as a strategy through which authority is extended beyond physical force. Significantly, when Smithers attributes Jones's success to luck, Jones immediately rejects the explanation, insisting instead that "I got brains and I uses 'em quick" (155). The exchange reveals that the story of the silver bullet originates not in supernatural belief but in conscious political calculation. Jones manufactures the myth in order to transform collective belief into a source of authority.

Jones repeatedly insists that the natives believe only a silver bullet can kill him. This belief enables his rule, but more importantly, it allows him to transform superstition into political capital. Sovereignty here rests on managed myth. The bullet functions as a guarantee that calculated violence can always secure control over collective belief. In this sense, it embodies a fantasy of technological invulnerability: the conviction that modern instruments can secure absolute control.

Yet the dramaturgy steadily undermines this conviction. As the forest regression deepens, the bullet's symbolic function begins to shift. Each discharged lead bullet marks not simply the erosion of ammunition but the depletion of performative authority. What remains is the single silver bullet—the last material sign of his sovereign myth. When Jones declares, "If I shoots dat one I'm a goner sho'!" (45), the statement registers more than tactical concern. It marks a significant reversal in Jones's relation to the myth he originally created. Earlier, the silver bullet functioned as a fiction that guaranteed authority over others. Here, however, Jones behaves as though the object itself possesses protective power. The myth is no longer something he controls from a position of distance. Instead, it begins to govern his own actions. The authority that once rested on the manipulation of belief becomes

dependent upon belief itself. It reveals that his sovereignty depends entirely upon the preservation of a single technological object. Authority has contracted into fetish.

This contraction becomes most legible when the silver bullet is read alongside the tom-tom. Throughout the play, the accelerating drumbeat synchronizes Jones's body with a collective rhythm he cannot command, while the bullet remains the emblem of isolated calculation and private control. The contrast is therefore not simply symbolic but temporal: the bullet promises interruption and decisiveness, whereas the tom-tom enforces recurrence and duration. One object imagines mastery as instantaneous and individual; the other imposes a communal temporality that steadily erodes the fantasy of autonomous agency.

The final scene transforms the silver bullet from a private object into a collective one. After Jones's death, Lem explains that the islanders "cook um money, make um silver bullet" (194). The significance of the statement lies not simply in the fact that Jones is killed, but in the way the myth survives its creator. What began as a fabricated story becomes a collectively shared belief capable of producing material consequences. The natives act upon the myth and thereby make it real. The silver bullet no longer belongs to Jones alone. It returns as a collective weapon that turns the logic of sovereignty against the sovereign himself.

This reversal is not incidental but carefully prepared. The play displaces sovereignty from individual possession to collective action. Jones's bullet is an emblem of modern technological individualism; the natives' bullet represents communal reappropriation. Power shifts from the imperial subject to the colonized collective. The myth that sustained his rule is reabsorbed into the community he sought to dominate.

Read in this way, the silver bullet does not simply symbolize the collapse of imperial performance; it exposes the material fragility of a sovereignty grounded in fetishized technology. Jones believes that control can be secured through calculable means, yet the forest sequence demonstrates that technological mastery cannot stand outside history. The bullet was never an ontological guarantee. It functioned only because spectacle, repetition, and collective belief temporarily sustained it. Once those conditions fail, the object is revealed as theatrical rather than absolute, and sovereignty collapses with it.

The ultimate irony lies in the fact that Jones dies not from primitive superstition but from the very technological logic he trusted. The weapon of modernity becomes the instrument of its own undoing. The silver bullet completes the sequence traced in the preceding scenes. Wage labor, penal discipline, slave auction, and Middle Passage strip away one form of authority after another; the bullet ends the process.

Only the opening and final scenes of *The Emperor Jones* contain conventional dialogue; the six intervening scenes rely predominantly on monologue and the dramatization of Jones's interior consciousness. This structural choice is not incidental. The forest scenes do not merely represent fear; they reorganize the basic conditions under which speech, perception, and time can operate on stage. Traditional dialogic exchange frames the drama at its beginning and end, but the core of the play—Scenes Two through Seven—takes place at night and consists of extended soliloquy. The shift from dialogue to interior monologue marks the transition from social performance to formal reorganization of dramatic speech, and from outward sovereignty to inward unraveling.

O'Neill frequently employed internal monologue as a means of rendering psychological tension, but in *The Emperor Jones* this device assumes structural

centrality. The forest scenes do not merely represent fear; they stage consciousness under pressure. Through extended soliloquy, the audience is granted access to Jones's terror, rationalizations, pleas, and unraveling self-narration. He calls upon God for forgiveness and protection, attempting to stabilize himself through Christian invocation. Yet these appeals are gradually displaced by apparitional figures emerging from his own past. His criminal history resurfaces first; thereafter, more deeply sedimented racial memories compel him toward identification with the very people he once dominated. Interior speech thus becomes the medium through which historical depth intrudes upon individual consciousness.

This formal structure—dialogue at the frame, monologic interiority at the center—creates the impression of a controlled dramatic mechanism rather than a sequence of episodic shocks. The forest scenes function as the engine of regression. Expressionist form becomes the technique through which racial memory is staged. What appears as subjective panic is gradually revealed as organized descent. The repetition of monologue reinforces the sense that the regression follows an internal logic rather than arbitrary disruption.

Sound intensifies this mechanism. O'Neill's use of the tom-tom is one of the most striking formal elements in the play. The beating of the drum, associated within the play with native ritual practice, recurs approximately twenty times from the first scene to the last. Far from mere atmospheric detail, the tom-tom operates as a rhythmic framework underlying the drama. It connects Jones's body to an external pulse that steadily intensifies as the play progresses.

The tom-tom does not merely generate suspense; it regulates the pace at which perception and speech break down. Each acceleration compresses the interval between response and reaction, so that Jones's language becomes

increasingly pressured, fragmented, and less able to sustain rational self-command. Sound here functions not as decorative atmosphere but as formal compulsion. The recurring beat displaces linear dramatic progression with an auditory recurrence that makes historical inevitability palpable on stage. The drum synchronizes Jones's heartbeat with a collective pulse that he cannot command, and this synchronization gradually interrupts the distinction between private consciousness and historical force. The more Jones attempts to restore order through speech, prayer, calculation, or gunfire, the more those acts are overtaken by rhythmic recurrence. In technical terms, O'Neill uses sonic repetition to interrupt rational dialogue and to convert sound into temporal pressure. What emerges is not abstract fatalism, but a dramatic form in which agency is increasingly staged as conditioned, delayed, and overwhelmed.

The drumbeat shortens the interval between perception and response, forcing Jones's language into increasingly fragmented patterns and leaving less room for rational deliberation. Monologue becomes less a transparent expression of interiority than a medium shaped by rhythmic pressure. Expressionism here operates not only through visual distortion but through the manipulation of pace and duration, making the erosion of agency audible as well as visible.

By this point, Jones has lost control over costume, rhythm, and speech. What the forest sequence makes visible is not merely the weakening of an individual will, but the formal dismantling of the theatrical mechanisms that once sustained imperial authority. The final comment belongs to Smithers, the sole white character, who concludes that Jones "died in de 'eighth o' style, any'ow" (54). The return to dialogue reimposes social distance and reduces Jones's performance to spectacle one last time.

In this sense, expressionism in the play does more than externalize Jones's fear. The forest sequence functions as a dramaturgy of regression whose power

lies in the interaction of monologue, rhythmic intensification, staged interruption, and historical sequencing. Expressionist technique organizes Jones's movement through fear, memory, and historical time. This section has therefore established the paper's central formal claim: regression is not a psychological motif alone, but a dramatic structure that arranges racial history on stage.

III. Double Consciousness and Imperial Mimicry

O'Neill's decision to center a Black protagonist on the American stage in 1920 situates *The Emperor Jones* within the racial crisis that Du Bois famously described as "the problem of the color-line" (13). Yet the play does more than represent racial tension; it dramatizes the instability of modern Black subjectivity. Jones is not simply a tyrant undone by fear, nor merely a victim of racial memory. He is a subject constituted by division—by what Du Bois terms "twoness," a consciousness compelled to see itself through the hostile gaze of a dominant society (5). In this chapter, that instability is approached through Jones's voice rather than through abstract psychology: speech, performance, and verbal breakdown become the primary means by which expressionism organizes divided subjectivity on stage.

Du Bois's formulation identifies double consciousness not as individual neurosis but as a structural condition in which the Black subject is forced to see himself through the hostile gaze of a dominant society. In Jones's case, this division is theatricalized through voice, costume, and command. His sovereignty depends upon performing a version of whiteness that can never fully admit him, so that authority becomes compensatory, staged against the very exclusion that necessitates it.

Jones's mastery of "de white quality talk" (15) exemplifies this strategy: he borrows the language of authority, shifts registers according to audience, and turns verbal control into a performance of rule. Jones's imperial persona can thus be read as the performative consequence of double consciousness. The "white quality talk" (15) and the overdecorated uniform function as attempts to stabilize a fractured self through the visible performance of legitimacy.

This is where Homi Bhabha's formulation of mimicry becomes crucial. If colonial mimicry produces subjects who are "almost the same, but not quite," then Jones's sovereignty depends on turning the divided perception that Du Bois describes into a visible and audible approximation of imperial power. His double consciousness does not remain an inner split; it is rendered on stage as a precarious performance of sameness underwritten by difference.

Yet mimicry contains its own destabilizing force. Because it rests upon imitation, it cannot secure authenticity. The emperor's power is contingent upon sustaining an illusion of transcendence—an illusion that the forest systematically dismantles. When the regression unfolds, it does not introduce instability; it reveals it. The collapse of imperial persona under the pressure of racial memory exposes what was always fragile.

Du Bois's double consciousness explains the psychic dimension of this fragility, but it must be read alongside the transatlantic formation of racial modernity. As Gilroy argues, Black identity emerges not within stable national boundaries but through histories of slavery, displacement, and imperial circulation. Jones's divided consciousness is therefore not merely an individual condition but a diasporic inheritance shaped by the Black Atlantic. When he invokes "Lawd" (16), he appeals to the rational, technological, and Christian frameworks through which he has attempted to stabilize himself. These gestures reveal not only fear but also a persistent investment in the ideological structures

that have sustained his authority. Yet these strategies of stabilization ultimately fail. The pressure of historical regression is registered here not primarily through spectacle, but through the erosion of voice, belief, and self-command.

The implosion of Jones's authority becomes clearer once speech is read alongside theory. Mimicry promises access to power but yields only approximation, while double consciousness sharpens awareness without resolving division. In the forest, that contradiction appears not only in large symbolic terms but in the breakdown of Jones's own verbal control. He cannot fully inhabit whiteness, yet he also cannot return to an unfractured collective identity. The chapter's point, then, is not simply that Jones is unstable, but that the play stages subject formation through voice, address, and their eventual breakdown.

The tragedy of *The Emperor Jones* therefore lies not in psychological disintegration alone, but in the structural contradiction of modern racial subjectivity. Jones dies not simply because he is punished, nor solely because he is consumed by fear. He dies because the modern Black sovereign is an impossibility within the logic of imperial modernity. His performance of power, grounded in mimicry and divided consciousness, cannot withstand the historical forces that produced it. What the forest sequence adds to this contradiction is a visible and audible mechanism through which that instability is played out: the breakdown of Jones's voice, the erosion of his costumed persona, and the reordering of time by the drum collectively demonstrate how sovereignty is staged and unmade. The forest does not destroy his authority; it discloses its condition of possibility.

This structural impossibility is not confined to Jones's interior life; it is staged outwardly in the way he governs the island and addresses its inhabitants. The dynamics of diasporic internal colonialism are most visible in the play's opening scene. Jones orders the islanders with the same clipped imperatives and

threats of punishment that once governed him: "When I says go, I means go" (12). His speech compresses time into command, tolerating no delay or negotiation. The natives' responses, by contrast, consist largely of deferential assent and reported fear, positioning them as subjects whose primary function is to confirm the emperor's authority. Jones's English, inflected with "white quality talk," thus operates as a linguistic technology of rule that reproduces within a Black context the asymmetries of colonial address.

Smithers's presence further clarifies this structure. As the sole white character, he alternately derides and validates Jones's authority while continuing to benefit from the colonial economy that Jones administers. Their relationship situates Jones's rule within a hierarchy that continues to privilege whiteness: Jones exercises authority over the island only so long as Smithers—and, ultimately, the absent American marines—tolerate his sovereignty. The island is therefore organized through two overlapping hierarchies. Jones occupies a position above the Afro-Caribbean population he governs, yet his authority remains subordinate to the white imperial order that authorizes and limits his rule. The play thus reveals a layered structure of domination in which colonial power is redistributed rather than dismantled.

Imperial mimicry explains the mode through which Jones acquires and performs authority. Yet mimicry alone cannot account for the social structure that results from that performance. The issue is no longer how Jones resembles imperial power, but how imperial relations are reproduced among differently positioned Black subjects within the Atlantic world. Once Jones assumes sovereignty, mimicry ceases to function merely as a strategy of self-fashioning and becomes a mechanism of governance. It is at this point that the concept of diasporic internal colonialism becomes necessary. Whereas mimicry describes the formation of the imperial subject, diasporic internal colonialism describes the

political order produced by that subject's rule.

By diasporic internal colonialism, the paper designates the reproduction of imperial hierarchy within racialized communities themselves. The term extends the established language of internal colonialism associated with Robert Blauner's analysis of racial domination within national space and adapts it to a transatlantic setting. Blauner originally employed internal colonialism to describe racial domination within a national framework, particularly the subordination of minority populations by a metropolitan center. The situation in *The Emperor Jones* differs in one crucial respect. As Blauner argues, American racial formation must be understood within a broader colonial framework grounded in Indigenous dispossession and "the enslavement of African peoples" (12). Seen from this perspective, Jones's authority does not emerge outside colonial history but from a social order already shaped by imperial domination.

The hierarchy in *The Emperor Jones* is therefore not organized primarily through white rule over Black subjects, but through unequal relations among Black subjects themselves. Nevertheless, the mechanisms of domination—economic extraction, coercive discipline, and symbolic authority—remain recognizably imperial. The concept of diasporic internal colonialism therefore does not replace Blauner's formulation so much as relocate it within the transatlantic circuits of the Black Atlantic.

What distinguishes this configuration from conventional internal colonialism is that domination is reproduced not between a metropolitan center and a colonized minority, but among differently positioned subjects within the Black diaspora itself. Jones occupies a privileged location shaped by American racial capitalism, whereas the islanders are situated within a Caribbean colonial order. The play therefore stages not simply racial domination, but the uneven circulation of power within the Black Atlantic.

In Jones's case, the point is not that he simply repeats a familiar sociological model, but that he carries disciplinary habits formed under American racial capitalism into a Caribbean context. He transplants practices of extraction, spectacle, and coercive rule that had already shaped him. His regime should therefore be understood less as personal betrayal than as the circulation of imperial form within the Black Atlantic.

In this sense, the play stages internal colonialism: a Black American subject colonizing other Black subjects. The island becomes a microcosm of imperial hierarchy. As Orr observes, Jones's regime echoes imperial parody (173). The preface's reference to an island "as yet un-self-determined by white marines" (5) subtly situates the drama within broader Caribbean imperial history, even as white colonial presence remains largely offstage. Pfister similarly notes that O'Neill foregrounds intra-Black conflict while displacing white colonial authority (128-29). The absence of direct white rule paradoxically intensifies its structural presence. Imperial authority persists not through visible enforcement but through inherited institutional logic.

Nevertheless, it remains reductive to portray Jones simply as a traitor to racial solidarity. His desire to enter "white discourse" reflects the structural pressures of American racial modernity rather than mere personal opportunism. As an African American subject formed through exclusion, Jones seeks authority through the very grammar that denied it to him. Imperial mimicry thus functions not as a simple repudiation of Blackness, but as a strategy of survival within a hierarchy that equates legitimacy with whiteness. The force of the play lies in showing that this strategy can produce local power while remaining doomed.

Thus, the failure of Jones's rule ultimately reveals the limits of imperial mimicry as a political project. It marks the collapse of American imperial

mimicry within a transatlantic racial framework. The same logic that enabled his rise—performance, calculation, domination—becomes unsustainable when confronted by collective memory and historical depth. Imperial sovereignty proves unstable not because it is Black, but because it is mimicry grounded in colonial hierarchy. The failure lies not in racial identity but in the borrowed structure of authority itself.

In this way, the play extends beyond psychological tragedy and becomes a critique of imperial modernity. Jones's downfall demonstrates that imperial domination can circulate within the Black Atlantic through unequal relations among differently positioned Black subjects. The collapse of his sovereignty reveals the limits of mimicry as a political project and prepares the transition to the representational questions examined in the final chapter.

IV. Modernist Primitivism and Representational Limit

If the previous chapters have demonstrated how imperial mimicry collapses through racialized regression, this section turns to the broader colonial framework within which that collapse becomes legible. The preface itself frames the action within imperial discourse: "The action of the play takes place on an island in the West Indies, as yet un-self-determined by white marines" (5). The phrase "un-self-determined" is especially revealing because it normalizes colonial supervision as historical background rather than naming it as violence. White imperial authority is thus written into the play's geopolitical premise even before it appears in embodied form. In this sense, Pfister is right to note that colonial power is displaced onto intra-Black conflict, but the more precise point is that white rule remains active by becoming atmospheric and taken for

granted.

Although the play reproduces elements of racial stereotype, they must be understood within the intellectual climate of early twentieth-century modernism. O'Neill attempts to depict what he perceives as the predicament of African American men negotiating racialized modernity. Jones is constrained not only by white supremacy but also—perhaps more insidiously—by inherited trauma, internalized hierarchy, and historical suffering. Jones's struggle to define authority within a racialized modern order reflects this tension between critique and inheritance. The play must negotiate these conflicting impulses if it is to prevent racial stereotypes from becoming fixed and unquestioned representations. Its ambivalence therefore reflects an unresolved tension between critique and inheritance rather than a simple endorsement of racial stereotype.

Yet stereotype remains materially present in the text, and this is where the play's critique becomes inseparable from its historical limitations. As John Henry Raleigh notes, Jones's association with the razor, the shovel, and recurrent crap-shooting draws upon stock assumptions about Black primitiveness circulating in earlier American drama (192). These details are not incidental embellishments. They reveal that the play cannot fully detach its critique of imperial authority from the racial codes through which that authority had long been represented. *The Emperor Jones* therefore destabilizes colonial spectacle while still relying on elements of the primitivist vocabulary that made such spectacle legible to its original audience.

Thus, *The Emperor Jones* occupies an ambivalent position within white colonial discourse: it exposes the theatricality of imperial sovereignty while relying upon racialized imagery shaped by modernist primitivism. This ambivalence leads to the central question of representation in the final sequence: whether the play can stage collective racial memory without

reabsorbing it into the primitivist vocabulary of white modernism.

The regression into African ritual poses a theoretically decisive question: does the play's final sequence recover a collective racial memory, or does it reproduce a projection structured by white modernist primitivism? The witch-doctor episode appears to stage an originary return, a movement toward some precolonial depth of being. Yet the representational vocabulary through which this return is rendered—ritual dance, incantatory speech, sacrificial spectacle—participates unmistakably in the early twentieth-century modernist fascination with the *primitive*. Modernist primitivism frequently configured Africa not as a historically determinate space but as a symbolic reservoir. In *The Emperor Jones*, this primitivist optic materializes through the stylization of ritual as spectacle rather than ethnographic specificity. The witch-doctor figure is rendered less as historical subject than as theatrical condensation of Western fantasies about origin and sacrifice.

Modernist primitivism often operated through aesthetic appropriation, transforming Africa into a symbolic resource for Western crisis. In the play, this logic appears as staging practice: ritual is presented through patterned sound, repeated movement, and compressed visual signs rather than through historical specificity.

The witch-doctor scene also works materially on stage. Voice rises and falls, movement becomes patterned, and the ritual is organized as choreography rather than as narrative explanation. This is why the scene unsettles imperial rationality so effectively: it shifts the terms of perception from calculation to rhythm, from command to bodily repetition. The issue is not simply whether the ritual is authentic, but how its theatrical form produces both critical force and representational difficulty.

As Marianna Torgovnick observes, Western modernism repeatedly imagined

the primitive as a repository of authenticity, instinct, and origin for a culture perceived as spiritually exhausted (9). Within such a discursive economy, Africa functions less as geographic reality than as aesthetic remedy—a compensatory figure for Western fragmentation. Read through this lens, the witch-doctor scene risks reiterating precisely such aestheticization. Its ritual choreography—"His voice rises and falls in a weird, monotonous croon. . ." (49)—registers less as anthropological reconstruction than as expressionist stylization. Africa emerges not as lived historical presence but as mediated theatrical sign.

Yet to construe the regression as mere projection would be equally reductive because the ritual scene is preceded by tableaux anchored in historically legible forms of racial violence. The preceding scenes establish a historically legible sequence of racial violence that gives the final ritual a determinate historical frame. The climax therefore does not float free of history, even if it is mediated through the aesthetic conventions of white modernism. It condenses collective trauma, but it does so through sound, movement, and stylized theatrical display. The result is a scene in which historical memory and modernist projection operate at the same time.

This tension clarifies the representational limit of O'Neill's modernism within Anglo-American modernist discourse. If, as Houston A. Baker, Jr. argues, modernist universality is grounded in a civilization that is "exclusively Western, preeminently bourgeoisie, and optically white" (87), then the witch-doctor sequence marks the point where that aesthetic order encounters material that it cannot fully absorb. The ritual destabilizes Jones's authority, but it does so through forms of representation that remain shaped by a Western modernist frame. What the scene finally reveals is both the force and the limit of that frame.

Read against Baker's intervention, the witch-doctor sequence exposes not

only the limit of Jones's sovereignty but also the conditions under which that limit can be staged at all. The ritual scene derives its theatrical power from the conversion of racial violence into stylized sound, movement, and image. In this sense, it does not simply reveal the boundary of white modernist understanding; it shows that modernist theatricality itself depends upon the aesthetic transformation of racial suffering into spectacle. The very forms that make Atlantic history visible on stage also risk reabsorbing that history into a primitivist economy of signs. Regression here is therefore doubly charged: it dramatizes the collapse of imperial mimicry and at the same time discloses the representational violence through which modernism has historically rendered Africa and Blackness intelligible.

V. Conclusion

This paper has examined *The Emperor Jones* through the relationship between expressionist form and Black Atlantic history. The forest sequence does not function simply as a representation of psychological fear or individual collapse. Rather, it arranges a series of historically recognizable formations—industrial labor discipline, penal confinement, slave commodification, the Middle Passage, and ritual sacrifice—within a structured process of regression. Through monologue, rhythmic intensification, distorted space, and recurrent sound, expressionist dramaturgy transforms these historical formations into a sequence of theatrical experiences. The forest thus becomes a space in which racial history is not recalled from outside the play but organized within its dramatic structure.

Read in this context, Jones's divided consciousness and imperial

performance emerge from a broader history of racial modernity. His authority depends upon the visible signs of sovereignty, yet those signs remain unstable because they are grounded in imitation rather than possession. The play therefore traces the gradual erosion of a political identity sustained through performance. At the same time, Jones's rule over the islanders demonstrates how imperial relations can circulate within the Black Atlantic itself. The collapse of his authority reveals not only the limits of individual sovereignty but also the persistence of hierarchical forms of power within diasporic space.

The final ritual sequence introduces a further complication. While the preceding scenes situate regression within historically legible forms of racial violence, the witch-doctor episode remains mediated through the aesthetic assumptions of modernist primitivism. The scene condenses collective memory into theatrical form, yet it also transforms that memory into stylized spectacle. What emerges is neither a simple recovery of African origins nor a purely modernist fantasy, but a tension between historical remembrance and aesthetic mediation. This tension marks a representational limit within the play itself.

The Emperor Jones occupies an important place in the development of American dramatic modernism because it demonstrates how questions of race, empire, and history are embedded in dramatic form. Expressionism in the play functions not only as a mode of representation but also as a way of organizing historical experience on stage. The significance of the forest regression lies in its ability to bring together subjectivity, imperial power, and collective memory within a single theatrical structure. Reading regression as historical sequencing therefore clarifies how O'Neill's experiment with expressionist form remains inseparable from the histories of slavery, empire, and racial violence through which that form acquires its meaning.

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