

Orientations in Time: Music and the Construction of Historical Narrative in
20th and 21st Century African-American Literature

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Abstract

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This dissertation argues that the intersections between African-American literature and music have been influential in both the development of hip-hop aesthetics and, specifically, their communication of historical narrative. Challenging hip-hop historiographers that narrate the movement as the materialization of a “phantom aesthetic”, or a sociological, cultural, technological, and musical innovation of the last forty years, this dissertation asserts that hip-hop artists deploy distinctly literary techniques in their attempts to animate, write, rewrite, rupture, or reclaim the past for the present. Through an analysis of 20th and 21st century African-American literary engagements with black music, musical figures, scenes of musical performance, and what I call ‘musical-oral’, I hope to demonstrate how prose representations of music disrupt the linear narratives of progress that have dominated historicism in the white, western world. By creating a self-reflexive aesthetic that draws the past into immediate conversation with the present, texts such as Langston Hughes’s *The Weary Blues* (1926) to Richard Wright’s *12 Million Black Voices* (1941), Ann Petry’s *The Street* (1946) and “Solo on the Drums” (1947), Sonia Sanchez’s *We a BaddDDD People* (1971), Toni Morrison’s *Jazz* (1992), and Colson Whitehead’s *Sag Harbor* (2009), offer a new model for understanding slavery and the African past, Marxian

class theory, gender politics, intersectionality, political calls for solidarity, and the formation of post-soul aesthetics such as hip-hop.

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Introduction

This project began with the historiography of hip-hop. While it took almost twenty-five years after the music's emergence for scholars to begin discussing its history and aesthetics, in only ten short years after Tricia Rose's foundational *Black Noise* (1994)¹, many of the definitive scholarly texts of the movement had already been written.² While these texts engage with the artistry, social meanings, politics, economies and appropriations of the music, their narration of the music's aesthetic innovations nearly always focuses on three aspects of its emergence: 1) the socioeconomic conditions surrounding hip-hop's origins 2) the technological advances of early deejays 3) the relationship between oral culture and the signification practices of emcees. The first, and most familiar narrative hinges on sociological accounts of white flight, deindustrialization, Reaganomics, and the politics of abandonment. The major flaw in this historiography is that people are often reduced to features of their neighborhood, their art characterized as either a reaction to or rebellion against those socioeconomic conditions. Parallel studies provide in-depth, detailed, and generally thoughtful explorations of deejaying technologies and techniques, including the development of the break, sampling, and mixing. Finally, nearly every major argument about the history of hip-hop aesthetics links emcees to the

¹ It should be noted that journalist including Bill Adler, Nelson George, Barry Michael Cooper, David Herskovitz, Greg Tate, and newspapers such as *The Village Voice* were all writing about the cultural intricacies of hip-hop before Rose's book came out. I am starting with her because it is the first major intersection between hip-hop and academia. Also see hip-hop anthologies *That's The Joint* (2012) and *And It Don't Stop* (2004) for a more comprehensive history of hip-hop journalism.

² While thousands of articles and hundreds of book have been written about hip-hop culture since Rose's book, this dissertation emerges from the research that appears in the following texts: S. Craig Watkins, *Hip-Hop Matters* (2005); Nelson George, *Hip-Hop America* (1998); Marc Anthony Neale; *What the Music Said* (1999); Houston A. Baker; *Rap, Black Studies, and the Academy* (1993); Jeff Chang, *Can't Stop, Won't Stop* (2005); S. Craig Watkins, *Hip-Hop Matters* (2005); Adam Bradley, *Book of Rhymes* (2009); Murray Foreman, *The 'Hood Comes First* (2002).

history of signification practices outlined by Henry Louis Gates Jr. in his classic 1985 text *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism*.

While each of these approaches, to varying degrees, has informed my understanding of hip-hop historiography, they all lack a distinct sense of the ways hip-hop aesthetics are shaped by the intersections between African-American literature and black music—its forms, figures, scenes of musical performance, and descriptions of what I call ‘musical-oral’ settings.³ Unlike the practices of signifying and oral storytelling, hip-hop did not emerge from entirely oral or vernacular cultures. Similarly, while hip-hop aesthetics are informed by previous musical forms and the development of the turntable, it is not exclusively a musical or technological innovation. What makes hip-hop unique is its incorporation of multiple genres forms, including the literary, in its exploration of black identity and African-American historiography. By attempting to narrate what James Weldon Johnson calls the “conscious and unconscious art” of oral tradition, or what Ralph Ellison describes as music’s ability to sound the “indefinable aspects of experience” (198), I argue African-American authors created new models and methods for writing and rewriting the past through musical aesthetics. Sometimes foundational to the text’s narrative and other times one of many constructs, music becomes the vehicle for animating, reclaiming, rupturing, or reshaping the past in the present. This method of historical compression, which refutes linear and teleological representations of African-American subjectivity, informs both the content and aesthetic forms of hip-hop culture.

³ What I mean by “musical-oral” settings are any sites in which musical culture is deliberately linked with oral expression or vice-versa. While I understand that oral cultures of storytelling, folklore, and signifying are distinct in many ways from musical practice, it is my hope to point out how these genres have consistently overlapped and drawn from one another in African-American cultural practice across the 20th century.

Rather than reaffirming popular culture's obsession with the 'ghetto' or simplifying the complexity of African-American cultural aesthetics to the realm of technology or orality, the literary opens up hip-hop historiography to a wide range of African-American subject positions, both past and present. In texts that range from Langston Hughes' poetic volume *The Weary Blues* (1926) to Colson Whitehead's novel *Sag Harbor* (2009)⁴, I examine how the persistent inclusion of musical forms assists in the transmission of aesthetic and cultural histories that stretch from the ancient past, to Africa, and across any number of points in the African-American past. These literary encounters with music offer an alternative African-American historiography, or a means of telling history and shaping cultural memory. It is my goal to observe not only how the past is shaped by the present in these texts, but also to note how the intersection between multiple genre forms could constitute a new direction in hip-hop historiography.

As a number of African-American writers and scholars across the twentieth century have noted, African-American musical and oral forms have been engaged in a process of aesthetic replication and revision that stretches from the African past to the technologically saturated markets of the present. The only avenues for African American cultural

⁴ While this dissertation deals with only seven literary texts, my argument is influenced by a wide range of African-American literary engagements with music. These include, but are not limited to: Paul Laurence Dunbar; *When Malindy Sings* (1896); Frederick Douglass, *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845); Booker T. Washington, *Up From Slavery* (1901); Jean Toomer; *Cane*; Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937); Nella Larsen, *Passing* (1929); Sterling Brown; *Southern Road* (1932); Langston Hughes, *Fine Clothes to the Jew* (1927); *Montage of a Dream Deferred* (1951); *Ask Your Mama: 12 Moods for Jazz* (1961); Ralph Ellison; *Invisible Man* (1952); James Baldwin; *Go Tell It On the Mountain* (1953), "Sonny's Blues" (1957); William Melvin Kelley, *A Different Drummer* (1962); Nikki Giovanni, *Black Feeling, Black Talk* (1970); Sonia Sanchez, *A Blues Book for a Blue Black Magic Woman* (1974); Gayl Jones; *Corregidora* (1975); Ishmael Reed, *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972); Ntozake Shang; *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide* (1976); Paul Beatty, *White Boy Shuffle* (1996).

expression from the 16th century through much of the 19th, signifying, oral storytelling, folklore, spirituals, sermons, dialect, and music were constitutive elements in the communication of individual experiences and communal histories. Largely distorted, silenced, or misrepresented as emerging from a ‘subhuman’ cultures or contexts, these aesthetic expressions nonetheless provided a means for people to subvert the oppressive social, economic, and political systems that contained them. Although there are notable exceptions in the traditions of 18th and 19th century African-American literary development, many of the texts written before the 20th century are confined to slave narratives, personal memoirs, and political pamphlets that supported the aims of abolition.⁵ Subject to validation by white publishers and patrons, and released in accordance with white reading audiences expectations, these texts occasionally gesture towards oral and musical traditions,⁶ but rarely consider the influence of these forms on the newly burgeoning field of literary expression.

⁵ Although texts such as Phyllis Wheatley’s *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* (1773) and Frances E.W. Harper’s *Moses: A Story of the Nile* (1869) are notable exceptions in the 19th century African-American literary tradition, nearly all the texts published by black authors in the 18th and 19th century dealt with slavery, abolition, passing, lynching, voting rights, and the affects of these systems on African-American communities. These include, but are not limited to, Ida B. Wells *Southern Horror* (1892) and *A Red Record* (1895); Frederick Douglass, *A Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845); William Wells Brown, *Narrative of William W. Brown, a Fugitive Slave* (1847); Sojourner Truth, *Narrative of Sojourner Truth* (1850); Solomon Northup, *Twelve Years A Slave* (1853); Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861); Frances E.W. Harper, *Iola Leroy* (1893). Notable newspapers that dealt directly with the African-American community, slavery and issues of abolition also included *The North Star* (1847-51), *Freedom’s Journal* (1827-1829), *The Colored American* (1837-1842), and *The National Era* (1847-1860).

⁶ The most notable example of this is Frederick Douglass’ narration of Aunt Hester’s scream and his observation shortly after that, “I did not, when a slave, understand the meaning of those rude and apparently incoherent songs...They told a tale of woe which was then altogether beyond my feeble comprehension; they were tones long, loud, and deep...Every tone was a testimony against slavery, and a prayer to God for deliverance from chains” (124-125).

However, at the turn of the twentieth century, African-American authors not only greatly expanded their exploration of musical and oral aesthetics, they also began to note overtly historiographic elements in these expressions. Although there are a myriad of black aesthetic theories that inform this dissertation, I anchor my argument in twentieth-century scholarship that discusses the relationship between musical and oral aesthetics and the narration of African-American subjectivity: W.E.B. DuBois' *The Souls of Black Folks* (1903); James Weldon Johnson's *God's Trombones* (1926); Zora Neale Hurston's "Characteristics of Negro Expression" (1934) and "What White Publishers Won't Print" (1947); Ralph Ellison's *Shadow and Act* (1953); Amiri Baraka's *Blues People* (1963); and Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s *The Signifying Monkey* (1986). I will also argue for the inclusion of Stephen Henderson's introduction to *Understanding the New Black Poetry* (1972) and Alexander Weheliye's *Phonographies* (2005) into this theoretical genealogy. Whether describing music as an affective transmission of memory, an aesthetic form of replication and revision, a double-sided discourse with racist ideologies, or a performative engagement with individual and community histories, each text presents music as a unique engagement with, embodiment of, or resounding of the past as it is understood and transmitted in the present. This variation in theoretical approaches dismantles reductive historiographies of hip-hop by demonstrating the historiographic impulse of hip-hop through its engagement with the literary.

One of the most influential African-American texts of the early 20th century, W.E.B. DuBois' *The Souls of Black Folks* establishes the importance of music to both black historiography and the communication of affect across time and space. A compilation of essays on history, sociology, and economics, as well as short stories and autobiographical

sketches, *The Souls of Black Folks* (1901) has stood as one of the defining texts in 20th Century interpretations of African-American history, psychology, sociology, literature, music, and art.⁷ While the final section of the book is dedicated to his analysis of the spirituals, music permeates the entire volume. Bars from famous spirituals are placed at the beginning of each chapter to reinforce not only the importance of multiple genres in the expression of African-American subjectivity, but the direct correlations between music and the historical narratives of the community. Beginning with “The Dawn of Freedom,” an essay about emancipation, is a line from “The Beginning and the End.” When discussing the necessity for black education, “March On” echoes in the background. More than an accompaniment, these songs are narratives of affect, stories of “of an unhappy people, of the children of disappointment, of death and suffering and unvoiced longing toward a truer world” (182). They are meant to convey what history felt like and it is these feelings that enhance all of the narratives that follow. As he describes in the final chapter, which deals directly with the Sorrow Songs, the bricks of Jubilee Hall are more than simply the mortar of a building, they are “red with the blood of dust and toil” and “full of the voices of the past” (180). While the material realities of the building tell of labor and toil, it is the voices within that remind the reader of the human voices that lived through these horrors and still found ways to communicate their subjectivity to the world. They sing in the present, but their songs are a method for expanding and contracting the scope of history. As DuBois

⁷ In addition to the hundreds of articles in which Dubois’ theory of “double-consciousness” appears, his careful descriptions of the economic and social dynamics of race inform countless works by scholars across the humanities. This includes, but is not limited to, works by Fred Moten (2003), Hortense Spillers (2003), Nathaniel Mackey (1993), Cedric Robinson (1983), Alexander Weheliye (2005), Eric Lott (1995), Toni Morrison (1992), Bernard Bell (2012), Claudia Tate (1999), Howard Bodenhorn (2015), and Ralph Ellison (1953).

describes, they are “the sifting of centuries”, or the narratives of feeling that link African-Americans to disparate temporal and physical spaces. Often “persistently mistaken and misunderstood”, these songs have the ability to both preserve the African-American past and address both the continuities and discontinuities that connect that past to the discourses and material realities of the present.

Extending DuBois’ argument for a powerful relationship between 20th century literary practice and 19th century African-American history and development, James Weldon Johnson focuses on the church and orality as an invaluable part of current black aesthetic practice. An introduction to the oral traditions of the 19th century that is followed by a poetic attempt to replicate the various sermons of African-American preachers, *God’s Trombones* (1926) insists on the importance of oral and aural culture in combatting the racist ideologies of the past. Although presented as a “semi-comic figure” (2), the “old-time” preacher found in the church “the first sphere in which race leadership might develop”. Rather than being sequestered to the past, Johnson translates these sermons into poems as a way of preserving this legacy of leadership and cultural tradition in the community. Focused on the methods these preachers use to spark the imagination and transform the temperament of the congregation, his introduction focuses on the multiple aesthetic practices necessary to revitalize the past for the present. A “conscious and unconscious art” that sends the listeners “in a moment alive and quivering” (5), the sermon activates the past in order to animate the present, emphasizing the experiences that tie each member of the congregation to the collective past from which it emerged. As he notes, the preacher’s words were “not prose but poetry” and the intonations of his voice were “what shall I say?—not of an organ or a trumpet, but rather of a trombone, the instrument possessing

above all others the power to express the wide and varied range of emotions encompassed by the human voice—and with greater amplitude” (Johnson 5). At a loss for how to describe the variance and multiplicity of the preacher’s voice, Johnson draws an analogy between oral, musical, and literary forms. Although Johnson admits his inability to capture the sermon’s grandeur, his work supports the use and development of black literature as a way to both preserve these forms and create a historical narrative that ties together oral, aural, religious, and literary forms.⁸

Also interested in preserving the legacy of 19th century black aesthetic tradition, Zora Neale Hurston turned towards folklore, dialect, and dance as necessary to an understanding of African-American historiography. Written over fifteen years apart, her essays “Characteristics of Negro Expression” and “What White Publishers Don’t Print” document and interpret both the creative ingenuity of the African-American community and the discourses of the white culture that have stifled these expressions through persistent images of stasis. In contrast to the “THE AMERICAN MUSEUM OF UNNATURAL HISTORY”, which presumes “all non-Anglo-Saxons are uncomplicated stereotypes” (“White Publishers” 55), Hurston’s discussions of dialect, the jook joint, imitation, dancing, folklore, originality, and drama challenge the erasure of African-American culture in both public contexts and historical record books. As Hurston notes, “Negro folklore is not a thing of the past. It is still in the making...nothing is too old or new, domestic or foreign, high or low, for his use” (“Characteristics” 36). Nothing in the past or present is lost to the creator of folklore, in fact, it is a measure of their creativity how well they assemble and reassemble

⁸ As Johnson asserts in his 1922 preface to *The Book of American Negro Poetry*, “the final measure of the greatness of all peoples is the amount and standard of the literature and art they have produced” (688).

material to contribute to the overall body of folklore that already exists. Similarly, the modification of the English language through dialect is driven by the desire to offer multiple interpretations of the same action or event, and do so in such a way that makes them immediately accessible to one another. As she states “the Negro’s greatest contribution to language is (1) the use of metaphor and simile; (2) the use of the double descriptive; (3) the use of verbal nouns” (“Characteristics” 32). By comparing dissimilar objects to suggest a resemblance, describing similar actions in different terms, and imbuing descriptive words with active suggestion, the speaker questions the stability of any discourse that relies on static interpretations of language or subjectivity. Time and time again, in chapters across this dissertation, I explore the way African-American writers disrupt the presumption by white audiences and society that “everybody knows all about” (“White Publishers” 55) African-American identity and history. Rather than accept this, these authors deploy musical and musical-oral settings as a way to both rupture images of historical stasis and offer new interpretations of the present.

Ralph Ellison’s essays in *Shadow and Act* (1963), which were published from the early 1950’s to the mid 1960’s and discuss topics from Mahalia Jackson to Charlie Parker, Richard Wright, black comedy, and the art of fiction, have come to define mid-century discussions of black aesthetics. While his prologue to *Invisible Man* (1951) has been repeatedly investigated for its deployment of music and memory⁹, in these essays he explores the importance of music as a marker of time, or a unique space for the transmission of personal and collective history:

⁹ See Andrew Radford (2003); James Booth (2008); Paul Allen Anderson (2005); Sara Wood (2002).

Perhaps in the swift change of American society in which the meanings of one's origins are so quickly lost, one of the chief values of living with music lies in its power to give us an orientation in time. In doing so, it gives significance to all of those indefinable aspects of experience which nevertheless help to make us what we are. In the swift whirl of time music is a constant, reminding us of what we were and of that toward which we aspire. Art thou troubled? Music will not only calm, it will ennoble thee.

(198)

Whether temporally disparate or immediate, music offers access to "the meaning of one's origins." Described as "constant", music does not allow for the obfuscation of the past, but encourages a conversation between one's past and present. Additionally, Ellison considers how music not only reaches backward, but also gestures towards the possibilities of the future. In each of the texts across this dissertation, music is deployed as a way for characters and communities to gain an "orientation in time," or an understanding of their subjectivity in relationship to recent, distant, and even ancient pasts. Music does not always replicate the past, but instead offers the listener and reader a renewed form of historical consciousness, or a way to situate themselves in relation to the past, present, and future.

Despite their clear differences on the use and purpose of music in the struggle for freedom, Leroi Jones/Amiri Baraka shares Ellison's assertion that music has the ability to document "the changing same", or those aspects of experience that both tie us to the past and offer new ways of thinking about the present and future. Inspired by the polyrhythmic arrangements, fast-paced, improvisational, rebellious sentiment of bebop during the forties and fifties, the Black Arts Movement committed to transforming these sentiments into

political action. Similar to the many other theorists I discuss, Jones views music as an active and activating force in the transmission of history. Music does not simply tell of the past, it also makes it heard and felt in the present. As he states in his groundbreaking text *Blues People* (1963):

[Music] was the history of the Afro-American people as text, as tale, as story, as exposition, narrative, or what have you, that the music was the score, the actually expressed creative orchestration, reflection, of Afro-American life, our words, our libretto, to those actual, lived lives. That the music was an orchestrated, vocalized, hummed, chanted, blown, scatted, corollary confirmation of the history. And that one could go from one to another...and be talking about the same things. The music was explaining the history as the history was explaining the music. And that both were expressions of and reflections of the people! (ix)

Suggesting a self-reflexive relationship between experience and sound, Jones describes music as a multi-faceted and complex rendering of historiography. For every “narrative” there is a “score”, or a record of African-American life that would more often than not be misrepresented or misunderstood by white audiences. However, for Jones the sounds were simply confirmations that the past was present and explications of the relationship between individual and community experiences through orality and aurality. His theory also accounts for the vast and multifarious ways these narratives were both collected and transmitted from person to person. As he notes in his essay “The Changing Same”, “[music] can be expressive of the entire force, or make it the occasion for some special pleading” (187). This oscillation between the individual and the community is particularly important

because it accounts for a wide variance in how authors narrate music in relationship to the past. For some authors, music reaches deeply into one's personal past and only gestures towards shared experiences, while for others, this process is inverted through a vast and overarching narrative of the community over time.

Contributing to the Black Art Movement's discussion of musical forms as a revolutionary practice, Stephen Henderson's *Understanding the New Black Poetry* (1972) begins with a nearly eighty-page long section titled "the forms of things unknown." Another theoretical attempt to make the unknown known, Henderson's text, similar to this investigation, creates a chronological record of African-American poetry and its various integrations and explications of musical practice. Providing examples that span from Phyllis Wheatley through the contemporary moment, his chronology reflects not only enduring patterns, but what he views as the themes and structures which best reflect the "communication of Blackness...or the intuited truth of the Black Experience in the United States" (Henderson 10). While we can see many of the primary arguments of the Black Arts and Black Power movements emerging within his work, his analysis is much more concerned with "how any serious appreciation or understanding of [black poetry] must rest upon a deep and sympathetic knowledge of black music and black speech" (Henderson 31). Including everything from children's songs to sermons, folklore, field cries, jubilees, spirituals, blues, jazz, the dozens, and even "non-jazz music by Black composers who consciously or unconsciously draw upon the black musical tradition" (31), the text insists on music as vital to an understanding of black literary practices. Offering context for how aesthetic practices such as understatement, virtuoso naming, free-rhyming, hyperbolic and metaphysical imagery, and adaptation of song forms have both evolved and maintained

continuity with the past, Henderson's introduction provides a strong model for the literary research and historiography hip-hop so desperately lacks. He is not concerned with the immediacy of the referent, but how that referent appears again and again, but with different aims and to different ends.

Extending Henderson's work beyond the borders of the United States and into the African cultural practices that have inflected African-American aesthetic, and specifically oral and literary expression, Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s *The Signifying Monkey* (1986) extends the genealogy of African-American musical and oral practices to East Africa and the mythologies of Esu-Elegbara and the practices of signification. Informed by theories of deconstruction, Gates traces the patterns of signification as creating instability in language's meanings. Transforming this linguistic instability into the cultural practice of signifying or, in very simple terms, "direction through misdirection" (75), Gates argues that African-Americans have engaged in a cultural process of replication and revision that stretches from Africa to the present day. Claiming that African-American authors from Toni Morrison and Alice Walker to Ishmael Reed are constantly engaged in these oral practices in their novels, Gates' text encourages the reader to acknowledge the immediacy of past aesthetics in constructions of narratives in the present. While signifying and its attendant practices of the dozens has been described time and time again by scholars as foundational to hip-hop practice, none draw parallels between Gates discussions of literature as a site where this is still forcefully enacted as well. By ignoring this literary tradition and how it constructs aesthetics as a referent for historical narrative, hip-hop historiographers isolate the movement as entirely an extension of oral practices, rather than a complex engagement with a variety of genres.

In addition to ignoring some of the relationships between signifying and literary practice, many scholars have overlooked how technology and technological culture have altered the transmission and reception of these oral practices across the 20th century. Drawing relationships between deejaying, W.E.B. DuBois' *The Souls of Black Folks*, Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, and the hip-hop diaspora, Alexander Weheliye's *Phonographies* (2005) presents African-American cultural expression as a carefully crafted amalgam of historical references and aesthetic histories. As he describes, "The 'mix,' as it appears in black cultural production throughout the twentieth century, highlights the amalgamation of its components, or rather the process of this (re)combination, as much as it accentuates the individual parts from which it springs." To consider hip-hop as an amalgamation of technological, oral, musical, and literary components offers an opportunity to highlight both the revolutionary aspects of hip-hop's aesthetics and its continuities with other African-American practices across the 20th century. To record one's self also means to create a record of the multiple influences, both past and present, that have been combined and (re)combined to create a sense of modern subjectivity. This dissertation builds on this assertion by considering how technologies of recording, in concert with a variety of musical and oral aesthetics, have transformed black literary practice into a distinct historiographic method of temporal compression.

Informed by all of these aesthetic theories, this dissertation creates a genealogy of 20th century African-American literature that, in its very construction, refutes the notion of linear narratives as being able to accurately or uniformly represent African-Americans. By implementing the self-reflexive aesthetics of African-American music into their narratives, I argue that texts such as Langston Hughes's *The Weary Blues* (1926) to Richard Wright's *12*

Million Black Voices (1941), Ann Petry's *The Street* (1946) and "Solo on the Drums" (1947), Sonia Sanchez's *We a BaddDDD People* (1971), Toni Morrison's *Jazz* (1992), and Colson Whitehead's *Sag Harbor* (2009), offer a new model for understanding slavery and the African past, Marxian class theory, gender politics, intersectionality, political calls for solidarity, and the formation of post-soul aesthetics such as hip-hop. In temporal intersections that stretch from the ancient past, through the annals of Africa, and across any number of points in the African-American past, these texts reveal how discourses of capitalism, gender, race, class, politics, and aesthetics interact across the twentieth century. The degree to which these discourses interact varies, but it could be said that all of these texts are acutely aware of their relationship to the material realities of past and present. However, a materialist analysis cannot account entirely for these expressions. Although Richard Wright and Ann Petry offer more distinctly Marxist or socioeconomic critiques of these realities, these conversations reappear in the bebop of Petry's short story, the localities of Whitehead's novel, and the music of John Coltrane in Sonia Sanchez's poetry. What the narration of music offers is a method for understanding the distinctiveness of each temporality and its material environments without obscuring it from the recent and distant pasts that inform its development.¹⁰

It is my hope that these literary engagements with music will provide meaningful case studies for the continued expansion and discussion of hip-hop's relationship to its aesthetic and cultural histories. For it is only when we begin to recognize hip-hop as a

¹⁰ The works of Cedric Robinson (1983), Angela Davis (1981; 1998), Hortense Spillers (1987), Cornel West (1982), Saidiya Hartman (1997), and Stuart Hall (1993) all help me explore how the racist economic, social, and political environments of the 19th and 20th century have shaped African-American literary and aesthetic production.

literary practice that we can begin to rethink hip-hop historiography and its relationship to a wide range of constituencies. By taking the literary seriously, hip-hop scholars could discuss the long history of primitivism and Afrocentric theory in relation to *The Jungle Brothers*, *Queen Latifah*, and *A Tribe Called Quest*. More work could be done to identify specific relationships between African-American Marxists, materialism, and the use of documentarian detail in hip-hop lyrics and/or videos. Whole projects could be dedicated to how black authors, politicians, leaders, speeches, and literary texts emerge within and shape hip-hop's understanding of modern subjectivity.

Chapter Summaries

This dissertation is divided into six chapters that stretch from Langston Hughes' poetic volume *The Weary Blues* (1926) to Colson Whitehead's 2009 novel *Sag Harbor*. While four of these chapters are full-length investigations, chapters three and five are what I refer to as "bridge" chapters. Focused on Ann Petry's short story "Solo on the Drums" (1947) and Toni Morrison's novel *Jazz* (1992), these shorter chapters not only create bridges between time periods, they both address texts that attempt to write their narratives as musical performances. Rather than simply describing scenes of musical performance or discussing musical figures, these texts shape their narrative structures as a performance for the reader. Oftentimes more subtle and nuanced in their critiques of social, political, economic, and discursive systems outside of performance, these texts reveal the ephemeral, subconscious ways performers engage with their recent and distant pasts to create a new sense of self.

Opening with one of the first and quintessential interactions between blues form and poetry, chapter one addresses Langston Hughes' poetic volume *The Weary Blues* (1926). Written at the intersection between observation, interpretation, and performance, it is my contention that Hughes' volume (not just his title poem) situates the blues aesthetic as a series of "moving metaphors." While *Fine Clothes to the Jew* (1927) has received more critical attention and praise because of its focus on the replication between form and content, I argue that scholars have overlooked the emphasis Hughes placed on the blues as a sociocultural record of African-American life at the turn of the century. An exploration of both blues form and the artistic and discursive contexts that shaped its performance and reception, *The Weary Blues*, as scholar Cheryl Wall describes, "initiates Langston Hughes's lifelong exploration of Harlem as setting and of blues as metaphor and form" (iii). Hughes' understanding of the blues as metaphor, a comparison between two dissimilar objects to suggest a resemblance, allows him to engage with the blues aesthetic without ignoring the capacity of poetry to outline the relationship between the blues and seemingly disparate discursive and temporal spaces. As I.A. Richards suggests, metaphor is not simply a displacement of words, but "fundamentally...a borrowing between and intercourse of thoughts, a transaction between contexts" (94). The logic of the metaphor allows Hughes to extend beyond the description and replication of the blues and into historical comparison, a productive "transaction between contexts." A method of historical animation, Hughes' deployment of what I call "moving metaphors" engages the specificity of the blues aesthetic while simultaneously drawing immediate and often dynamic comparisons between historical narrative and contemporary contexts. Encompassing a series of concepts that includes Hughes' deployment of persona, primitivism, images of Africa, and what James

Cone identifies as “secular spirituality”¹¹, these metaphors “move” between referents and voices in an attempt to critique historically racist and reductive narratives, as well as challenge the divisions between secular and spiritual forms of black musical expression.

Shifting from the specificities of the Harlem Renaissance to the documentarian detail of African-American social realism in the 1930s and 1940s, my second chapter addresses how Richard Wright’s photo-text documentary *12 Million Black Voices* (1941) and Ann Petry’s novel *The Street* (1946) express a growing concern with the place of culture in the struggle for social, economic, and political freedom. Addressing how African-Americans’ prolonged engagement with capitalist structures and bourgeois ideologies has either facilitated revolutionary cultural forms or neutered them from the sources which give them meaning and value, these texts demonstrate how the aligned “aesthetic ideologies” (Denning 202) of the interwar period often produced disparate interpretations of culture’s relationship to capitalism and its ability to enact social change. Speaking as the collective “we” of the African-American working class, Wright’s photo-text documentary narrates 350 years of history, frequently drawing connections between the material conditions of the photographs and the ideological remnants of racial capitalism described in the narrative. The creative extension of ideas presented in his famous essay “Blueprint for Negro Writing” (1937)¹², *12 Million* presents vernacular, folklore, sermons, and the blues as both a trans-historical record of everyday resistance and a genealogical iteration of capitalism’s contradictions. A radical assertion of Marxist historiography and cultural

¹² While Wright never explicitly discussed the relationship between these two texts, reading them side-by-side clearly demonstrates the relationship between his early Marxist theories and this later work of creative non-fiction.

nationalism, the text suggests that African-Americans' prolonged engagement with Christianity and racial capitalism (as both commodities and workers) resulted in the development of a latent, but revolutionary social consciousness. Far less optimistic about the ability of culture to assuage the ravages of capitalism, Petry's text is told from the individual perspective of Lutie Johnson, a single mother living and working in Harlem. Offered limited opportunities for work because of her race and gender, constantly under the threat of sexual assault, and entrapped by the very money she needs to escape, Lutie desperately clings to a "promise of prosperity and social mobility" (Dickstein xxi) that began with Benjamin Franklin and has persisted well into the 20th century. With a near obsessive internal dialogue about money and an attempt to escape the "dirty, dark, filthy traps" (*The Street* 73) of Harlem, Lutie optimistically jumps at the opportunity to become a singer and finally escape the street. However, when she realizes that singing is simply another form of entrapment, all of the fantasies and visions she has of constructing a better life for herself and her son come crashing down. This interaction with music leads to her violent and tragic downfall and suggests that culture, while containing the possibility for profoundly expressing the contradictions of capitalism, can do very little to fundamentally alter the system it describes.

Distinct from the previous works I discuss, chapter three addresses how Ann Petry's short story "Solo on the Drums" (1947) attempts to replicate performance in prose. Focused entirely on one performance and the internal dialogue of Kid Jones as he remembers the loss of his wife to the piano player earlier that morning, the text reveals the jazz artist's desire to make invisible emotions visible and communicate a story that does not ignore one's personal history, but reanimates it to create a new understanding of the

past, and consequently, one's self. Short, visceral, non-linear, and episodic, Petry's narrative is constructed as a prose performance that attempts to replicate the variations in tempo, rhythm, and mood that characterize live jazz performance. Unable to entirely duplicate sound, Petry focuses on the affect of the music, or the "resonances that circulate about, between, and sometimes stick to bodies and worlds" (Seigworth 14). Revealing glimpses from Kid Jones' recent and distant past, this technique creates a correlative between sound and memory that does not allow the reader to dissociate Kid Jones from his interactions with the band or those people his narrative recalls and reimagines. In the occasional, but important shifts between the internal machinations of the player and the reactions and perspective of the audience, Petry also addresses how Kid Jones' persona is shaped by the wider public audience and their relationships to consumer culture. This tension between virtuoso performance, or the players' ability to tell his story, and the obfuscations of the raced marketplace allows for a commentary on the increasing dissonance between the performer and the apparatuses of commodity culture. Although Kid Jones' performance emerges from "the subtle and rhythmical shaping of an idea," the audience still imagines him as a transhistorical symbol of blackness, or a tragicomic figure they have created over the last two hundred years and who now appears before them as "an alienated artist living in the sordid world of jazz and urban nightlife" (Lopes 1470).

In my fourth chapter, I address Sonia Sanchez's poetic volume *We a BaddDDD People* (1970), considering how the Black Arts Movement shaped language into a weapon that carries "performative" power, or the ability to transform historical reflection into a calculated physical, emotional, political, and social response. Emphasizing a comprehensive agenda for inter and intra-racial affairs, this program of aesthetic and political activism

rested not only upon the reclamation of language, but also on action felt, seen, and heard. New clothes, slang, poetry, theater, visual arts, and music carried liberatory power and designated as such, redefined how African-American communities might engage culture to explore their own history as well as the dominant historical narratives that distorted or erased that history. Billie Holiday, John Coltrane, and African drums not only provide musical correlatives capable of transforming the language of Malcolm X and Franz Fanon into a vividly multi-generational struggle for social and human justice, they also offer important sites for debates about the efficacy of previous historical narratives and aesthetics in their current struggles for freedom. To establish the context for the emergence of Sanchez's poetry, the chapter first considers the importance of historical narrative in relation to cultural practice through a number of political and social figures. This includes, but is not limited to, Amiri Baraka, Larry Neal, Franz Fanon, Stokely Carmichael, Addison Gayle, James T. Stewart, Albert Murray, and Sonia Sanchez herself. The final sections turn more specifically to Sanchez's engagement with music, presenting the blues debates through the figure of Billie Holiday, and analyzing the inspiring political aurality of John Coltrane's transcendent musical philosophies. Taken together, these conversations demonstrate the ability of African-American music to reshape how the actions and aesthetics of the present are informed and catalyzed by the past.

A focused effort "to blend that which is contrived and artificial with improvisation" ("Art of Fiction" 81), Toni Morrison's novel *Jazz* (1992) is the focus of chapter five. A challenge to the familiar constructs of master narratives that "spoke *for* African descendants, or *of* them" (*Playing* 50), Morrison creates a musical-linguistic performance that attempts to reconcile her characters' past with the silences and fragmentations they

perpetuate in the present. Unlike Ann Petry, who also explores writing literature as a musical performance in “Solo on the Drums”, Morrison does not speak through the player, but instead views herself as a linguistic corollary to the jazz ensemble. Set in 1920’s Harlem but rapidly shifting between the present, recent, and distant past, the novel traces how the marriage of Violet and Joe Trace digresses into extended silences, affairs, acts of violence, and eventual reconciliation. Invested in the notion of a “continuous present” (“I Come” 130), Morrison’s characters are presented as dynamic and in process, or unable to be reduced to any singular motivation or definition. While many scholars have noted the fragmentation, cracks, fissures, and silences that permeate the novel, they often fall into the habit of interpreting them as irreconcilable forms of ‘cultural mourning’, a mounting sense of double-consciousness, or an evaluation of the losses and misunderstandings that accompany the movements of the Great Migration.¹³ While recognizing these factors are valuable to our understanding of the characters, I read these dislocations and fragmentations in concert with Morrison’s deployment of jazz techniques to discern the process by which fragmentation occurs and is tenuously recovered through the expressive potential of music.

Combining the instability of adolescent youth with references to familiar historical figures, popular music, radio, fashions, and trends of the 1980’s, Colson Whitehead’s *Sag Harbor* (2009) demonstrates the changing ways African-American literature has incorporated contemporary facets of hip-hop in order to rethink the construction of

¹³ See Rubenstein, Roberta. "Singing the Blues/Reclaiming Jazz: Toni Morrison and Cultural Mourning." *Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature* 31.2 (1998): 147-63; Hardack, Richard. "'A Music Seeking Its Words': Double-Timing and Double Consciousness in Toni Morrison's Jazz." *Callaloo* 18.2 (1995): 451-71; Anne Paquet-Deyris. "Toni Morrison's 'Jazz' and the City." *African American Review* 35.2 (2001): 219-31.

individual subjectivities and historical narrative. By telling the story of 13 year-old Benji, his friends, and their struggle to find out what it means to be “black boys with beach houses” (72), I argue that Whitehead shows the impossibility of creating a stable and fixed identity in the post-soul era and the necessity of incorporating musical forms as a way of rethinking meaning making within contemporary black fiction. Challenging historiographies of hip-hop that focus primarily on a narrative of the socioeconomic conditions in New York during the 1970’s and the technological innovations that took place in the aftermath of these developments, Whitehead’s novel incorporates the aesthetics of deejaying to continually layer Benji’s narrative with references from the past and present. Seamlessly integrating the long-standing historical precept of “double-consciousness” and aesthetic practices such as signifying and orality with multiple references to popular culture throughout the 1980’s, he creates conversations between complicated and often contradictory discourses that shape historical narratives in the highly commodified world of hip-hop. The novel demonstrates how contemporary formulations of African-American identity have become, like black popular culture, “a site of strategic contestation” which “can never be simplified or explained in terms of simple binary oppositions that are habitually used to map it out: high and low; resistance versus incorporation; authentic versus inauthentic; experiential versus formal; opposition versus homogenization” (Hall 470). Whitehead’s construction of Benji and his friends’ physical and socioeconomic localities shatters these preconceptions, forcing the reader to recognize identities that move betwixt and between these dichotomies. Being African-American, middle-class, and mostly unaffiliated with the scenes of “ghetto life” reproduced within hip-hop, Benji and his friends must not only negotiate the current representations of what it means to be

“authentically” black, but they are also forced to process how intra-racial concepts of previous historical generations (“Militant”, “Street”, “Bootstrapping Striver”, “Proud Pillar”) will effect their eventual maturation.

Across these 6 chapters, I hope to demonstrate how African-American literature can contribute to a more expansive history and tradition of black aesthetic practices within hip-hop. This kind of cross-referential work insists on not only the ability to read several artistic forms at once, but also to consider how those generic interactions change the reader’s perception of the characters and communities discussed within African-American literature across the twentieth century. Once hip-hop scholars and historiographers embrace these literary engagements as valuable sites for understanding the origins, forms, aesthetics, and content of hip-hop, the historical scope and detail applicable to hip-hop will greatly open up. No longer will these aesthetic traditions be confined to the urban environments of post-modern America. They could then be considered both within and beyond these boundaries, both materially, physically, emotionally, psychologically, and historically.

Chapter One

Destabilizing Historical Stasis: Langston Hughes' *The Weary Blues* and the Deployment of Music as Metaphor

“It’s the way people look at things, not what they look at, that needs to be changed.”

-Langston Hughes, 1926¹⁴

In titling his first volume of poetry *The Weary Blues* (1926), Langston Hughes was calling attention to both the poem that made him famous and the musical aesthetics that influenced much of his career moving forward. While “The Weary Blues”, as an individual poem, has come to represent one of the first and quintessential interactions between blues form and poetry in America, the volume is rarely discussed as a whole and is frequently positioned as a text of secondary importance to his 1927 volume *Fine Clothes to the Jew*. Concerned with the exact replication between form and content, scholars such as Arnold Rampersad and David Chinitz undervalue the importance Hughes placed on the blues as a sociocultural record of African-American life at the turn of the century.¹⁵ An exploration of both blues form and the artistic and discursive contexts that shaped its performance and reception, *The Weary Blues*, as scholar Cheryl Wall describes, “initiates Langston Hughes’s

¹⁴ In response to seven questions in *The Crisis* circulated to writers and entitled “The Negro in Art: How Shall He Be Portrayed?”, this simple statement seems to be in direct response to questions that reflected Talented Tenth aims, in particular questions about “the continual portrayal of the sordid, foolish, and criminal among Negroes” and “the popular trend in portraying Negro character in the underworld” (1).

¹⁵ As Arnold Rampersad (1986) argues in his analysis of *The Weary Blues*, “the conventional lyrics about nature and loneliness, or poems in which the experience of the common black folk is framed by conventional poetic language” do not accurately reflect blues culture or aesthetics. He even goes so far as to say “the blues are not present—despite the sonorous title.” (149) David Chinitz (2013) takes a slightly different approach by praising Hughes use of persona in *Fine Clothes* and overlooking its importance in *The Weary Blues*. As he notes, *Fine Clothes* “use of persona allows [Hughes] to take the next step beyond ‘The Weary Blues’ and begin *writing* blues instead of writing *about* blues...” (his italics 44).

lifelong exploration of Harlem as setting and of blues as metaphor and form”(iii). Hughes’ understanding of the blues as a vehicle for creating comparisons between two dissimilar objects to suggest a resemblance allows him to engage with the blues aesthetic without ignoring the capacity of poetry to outline the relationship between the blues and seemingly disparate discursive and temporal spaces. Written at the junction between observation, interpretation, and performance, Hughes volume (not simply its title poem) reminds the reader, as I.A. Richards suggests, that metaphor is not simply a displacement of words, but “fundamentally...a borrowing between and intercourse of thoughts, a transaction between contexts” (94). The logic of the metaphor allows Hughes to extend beyond the description and replication of the blues and into historical comparison, or a productive “transaction between contexts.” A method of historical animation, Hughes deployment of what I call “moving metaphors” engages the specificity of the blues aesthetic while simultaneously drawing immediate and often dynamic comparisons between historical narrative and contemporary contexts. Described in this chapter through persona, primitivism, images of Africa, and what James Cone identifies as “secular spirituality”¹⁶, these metaphors “move” between referents and voices in an attempt to critique historically racist and reductive narratives, as well as challenge the divisions between secular and spiritual forms of black musical expression.

Oscillating between speaking as himself, an audience member, a dancer, a performer, a poet, and a member of the Harlem Renaissance community who resides at the crossroads of contemporary representation, Hughes poetic persona is the most prevalent moving metaphor within the volume. Deeply inspired by Walt Whitman, Hughes sought to

create a poetry that was undeniably American, democratic, freed from conventional forms, and succinct in its representation of African-American voices that were transformative in the creation of the nation as he understood it.¹⁷ The variance in his poetic persona accounts for multiple and sometimes contradictory subjectivities, challenging the compulsion to define the blues, or any cultural expression, in absolute terms. As Stephen Tracy notes, the blues can be described in any number of ways:

Some say all blues are sad. Others claim that they are happy. This one says they are political; that one, apolitical. The blues, it is said, are a personal expression. No, comes the reply, they express the values of the group. Dramatic dialogues. Self-catharsis. Audience catharsis. Dance music. Devil Music. Truth. The truth is, the blues *can* be all of these things. (75, his italics)

The truth is that nearly all of these components appear within Hughes volume at some point or another. A combination of semi-autobiographical poems, subjective third person utterances, imagistic fragments, and several instances that invoke a communal, Whitmanesque “I”, the poetic persona of *The Weary Blues* connects the individual to the community and the spoken intricacies of the blues to the unspoken narratives that inflected its reception. While Hughes often speaks as an observer of the blues or from the perspective of the poet, his deployment of multiple, unnamed personas captures the individual creativity and improvisation of blues culture while challenging the perceived

¹⁷ Arnold Rampersad’s biography of Hughes found that in his early poetic career, Walt Whitman and Carl Sandburg became his major poetic influences; “And in apprenticing himself to Whitman and Sandburg, he freed himself from the most conventional kinds of imitation, especially sentimental Anglophilia; he joined a rival tradition grounded in a passion for native, democratic themes and flexible forms, especially free verse.” (29)

simplicity of those aesthetics and the people who perform them. Acts of historical reclamation and temporal compression, Hughes' personas reach beyond the specificity of the individual into gestures towards the collective experiences of the community. These comparisons demonstrate the continuities between African-American historical experiences and reclaim the blues as both a distinctly modern, but historically rooted form of cultural aesthetics.

Further elaborating on his feeling that the blues are a record of continuity and change, Hughes volume demonstrates that blues aesthetic cannot simply be characterized by the Great Migration and the shift from rural to urban, or spiritual to secular. With discussions of sex, sexuality, domestic violence, extramarital affairs, and the transience of most adult relationships (amongst many other topics), the blues became yet another way to rationalize the raced and gendered stereotypes that characterized the 19th century and were foundational to the implementation of Jim Crow politics.¹⁸ Challenging those both within and outside the African-American community who viewed the blues as the secular and sin-laden inheritor of the spirituals, the volume troubles the divisions between the physical and metaphysical, the spirit and the body. Rather than a desire for escape in the afterlife, the movement of blues dancers and the growls, scats, and wails of blues performers reflect both the "misty wanderings and hidden ways" (182) of the spirituals and a new sense of secular self-worth. Reclaiming a black spirituality that lies beyond the physical and psychological legacies of American slavery and the confinements of contemporary discourse, the volume represents the blues as a reiteration and

¹⁸ See Angela Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism* (1998), pgs. 3-12 for more information on the relationship between the spirituals and the blues.

reimagining of Biblical narrative and ancient female icons. By comparing jazz players to the exile of Jews in Babylonia and black female dancers to the historiographies of Eve and Cleopatra, Hughes transforms sites of apparent transgression into powerful forums for the expression of African-American subjectivity. These unlikely and highly complex pairings constitute Hughes second major “moving metaphor”, and through their simultaneous presentation, force a reconsideration of ancient narrative and its relationship to modern identity formation.

Considered “low” culture, or something made for the masses, but ultimately disengaged from representations of middle-class respectability and white, western forms of aesthetics, the blues became a very public and popular medium for the projection of white fantasies and the exploration of white fears.¹⁹ With perceptions of Africa as ‘the Dark Continent’ permeating both European and American culture throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth century, accounts of Africa supported the assumption that Africans, and by extension, African-Americans were subhuman and lacking in social organization, civilization, and self-control.²⁰ Defined by public imagination rather than actual conditions, African-Americans became an easily digestible “other”, a population whose history and historical narratives were stifled by the discursive ‘darkness’ of Africa, dichotomous representations of Egypt, and homogenized beliefs about the ‘loose’ or ‘lacking’ morals of black communities. Through the inversion of Africa’s “darkness” and frequent juxtapositions of the modern and the primitive, Hughes not only explores how primitivism is a sign of modernity, but suggests that the modern invented the primitive.

¹⁹ See Leroi Jones’ *Blues People* (2002), pgs. 50-93;

²⁰ See Michael McCarthy (1983), pgs. 125-150 for more information on the perceptions of Africa by Americans.

Metaphorically shrouded in darkness and sensationalized in the public imagination, the rise of Egyptomania only further homogenized representations of African-Americans and black peoples globally. As white Americans embraced Egypt as “a sign of ancient and modern, religious and secular, proper and shocking, oppression and resistance, civilized and savage, black and white” (Trafton 5), African-American cultural expressions became associated with ‘primitive’ impulse that categorized religious and cultural expression as the extension of an unchanged and underdeveloped populace. Fruitfully comingled throughout the volume, these final two “moving metaphors” also help illuminate relationships between the centers of blues culture (where the volume begins) and the travels to Africa and Europe described in later sections.

A conduit for the animation of these metaphors, *The Weary Blues* not only define history through an African-American perspective, but also harnesses the blues aesthetic to engage with the damaging historical continuities between discursive and temporal environments. At times directly related to its aesthetics and at others a representation of African-American life at the turn of the twentieth century, the blues offers multiple sites of historical reclamation and temporal compression. This chapter will first evaluate the “Proem”, or the preamble to the volume, as both an introduction to the moving metaphors that will follow and a formulation of historical stasis that Hughes intends to shatter through blues form and aesthetics. This will be followed by an evaluation of poems that immediately address blues music and cabarets, and completed with an analysis of Hughes’ travel poems and their relationship to the discursive contexts that shaped blues performance and reception.

“Proem” and the Introduction of Persona, Primitivism, and Secular Spirituality

Before Carl Van Vechten offers his brief biography of Langston Hughes' life and his assertion that the volume's poems have "a highly deceptive air of spontaneous improvisation" (*The Weary Blues* 13), Hughes carefully placed the "Proem", or poetic preamble. This "Proem", free from the influence of Van Vechten's glowing introduction and isolated from the poems that follow, is one of the most formally structured poems of the volume and could be said to contain reductive, although laudatory, representations of Africans and African-Americans. It is my assertion that this "Proem" or preface to the volume is meant to introduce the discursive and aesthetic contexts Hughes is entering, and his intent to reinvent them through the creativity and improvisation of the blues culture that follows. It is here that Hughes introduces his three major metaphors, the limitations they contend with and the possibilities they contain. The "Proem" reads as follows:

I am a Negro:

Black as the night is black,
Black like the depths of my Africa.

I've been a slave:

Caesar told me to keep his door-steps clean.
I brushed the boots of Washington.

I've been a worker:

Under my hand the pyramids arose.
I made mortar for the Woolworth Building.

I've been a singer:

All the way from Africa to Georgia
I carried my sorrow songs.
I made ragtime.

I've been a victim:

The Belgians cut off my hands in the Congo.
They lynch me now in Texas.

I am a Negro:

Black as the night is black,
Black like the depths of my Africa. (*The Weary Blues* 13)

By breaking down each stanza, we can begin to discern the metaphors that will drive the volume and how Hughes intends on manipulating these to shatter the perceived stasis that surrounds each statement of identity and historical compression. Beginning the first and last stanza with an affirmation of existence and a simple, but powerful statement of identity, Hughes introduces the potential speakers the reader will encounter throughout the volume and affirms the metaphoric darkness surrounding Africans and African-Americans. Although the last two lines of the stanza read as successive similes, "Black as the night is black,/ Black like the depths of my Africa.", Hughes deployment of the second simile demands to be read metaphorically. As linguistic scholars Robyn Carston and Catherine Wearing note, "in the metaphor case, the implications are logically implied by the ad hoc concept, while in the simile case they are derived by a process of considering encyclopaedic assumptions" (297). In other words, on the processual and psychological level, similes invoke literal associations, while metaphors invoke categorical or concept driven associations. Hughes first statement, "Black as the night is black", refers to a visual and literal referent, his skin is dark. The second statement, although mimicking the structure of the simile above, is not literal, it in fact requires a metaphoric comparison; his skin is not dark as Africa, it is perceived to be as dark and misunderstood as the place to which he refers. Taken together, Hughes speaks of a people unknown, or a place perceived to be bereft of light when it has yet to be exposed as a false and stultifying form of metaphoric discourse. The blues aesthetic, as a powerful voice within the African-American community, exposes this proverbial darkness to the light of black experience nationally and internationally. Presumptions of stasis are converted into dynamic

dichotomies, reminders that the blues “unites joy and sorrow, the love and the hate, the hope and despair of black people; and it moves the people towards a direction of total liberation” (Cone 5).

Even Hughes’ opening statement of identity and its repetitions of “I’ve” throughout the rest of the poem plays down the complexity each statement carries. When he says, “I am a Negro” he is not simply referring to himself, but to people of color in a wide variety of temporal and spatial locations. It is here that Whitman’s influence on Hughes is clearly discernable. As Hughes discusses in his introduction to *I Hear the People Singing: Selected Poems of Walt Whitman*:

One of the greatest “I” poets of all time, Whitman’s “I” is not the “I” of the introspective versifiers who always write only about themselves. Rather it is the cosmic “I” of all peoples who seek freedom, decency, and dignity, friendship and equality between individuals and races all over the world...the Whitman spiral is upward and outward towards a freer, better life for all, not narrowing downward toward death and destruction. (3)

In the “Proem”, Hughes collective “I” signals the blues aesthetic, in particular the exhortation of the individual voice and how it successfully or unsuccessfully evokes the collective consciousness, histories, or experiences of its audience. Like Whitman, Hughes poems move “outward toward a freer, better life for all”, connecting his audience to those he encounters, those he imagines encountering, and those historical narratives that impact how African-Americans understand their past in the present. His persona-based blues aesthetic transforms historical narrative, like the experiences of the singer, into a vacillation between the individual and collective, the physical and the psychic, the secular

and the spiritual. No categorization is without complexity and inherent contradiction. Defining and redefining one's history is a form of freedom, or at least an incessant call for the reconsideration of African-Americans relationship to culture, religion, aesthetics, and identity.

Challenging the perception that people of color were simply passive recipients of history rather than active agents in its development, the central stanzas of the poem discuss how the "slave", "worker", "singer", and "victim" of racist violence, contributed to the creation of culture and industry from Africa to America. In addition to foreshadowing the number of subjects he will encounter or speak for throughout *The Weary Blues*, these stanzas also gesture towards the temporal and spatial scope of the work that follows. Each stanza presents seemingly unrelated stages of historical development and provides present-day parallels that challenge the erasure of black voices from the annals of history. Rather than indulge representations that silence or create discursive stasis around people of color, Hughes is selective about what historic events and referents he deploys throughout the volume. Instead of focusing on the physical and psychological traumas of slavery, he reminds the reader that "Caesar told me to keep his door-steps clean./ I brushed the boots of Washington." Present at the dawn of Western civilization and the founding of the nation, two events that would not be possible without the slave, this image touches on both physical labor and psychological specter of slavery that made notions of 'civilization' and 'freedom' possible.²¹ As Toni Morrison discusses in her exploration of race and nineteenth century American culture, a non-white or "Africanist" presence offers "both a way to talking about and policing matters of class, sexual license, and repression" and an

²¹ See Cedric Robinson (1983), Saidiya Hartman (1997), and Balibar and Wallerstein (1991).

opportunity “to inscribe and erase, to escape and engage...to historicize and render timeless” (7). To justify slavery, white western civilization created an easily digestible other, a figure of primitivism that satisfied the public desire for binary representations of race, gender, and culture (e.g. white/black, good/evil, pure/sullied, spiritual/secular, Rome/Egypt). To avoid this damaging bifurcation, Hughes and many other Harlem Renaissance writers either eschewed slavery, or were very careful about what representations they endorsed. Later in the volume, Hughes enacts a reversal of the Great Migration and the Middle Passage that presents modern black identity as undoubtedly attached to, but not tragically beholden to slavery.

For Hughes, the larger concern was how modern notions of the primitive both built upon stereotypical nineteenth century perceptions of African-Americans and damaged popular perceptions of the blues. For some within the community, W.E.B. DuBois included, there was a feeling that the blues were simply a further representation of “the sordid, foolish, and criminal among Negroes” (*The Crisis*). Outside of the African-American community, these perceptions took on even more pernicious forms; blues singers, as conduits for primitivist impulses became reflections of “our untamed selves, our id forces—libidinous, irrational, violent, dangerous. Primitives are mystic...Primitives are free...Primitives exist at the ‘lowest cultural levels’; ‘we occupy the highest’” (8). A natural channel for the continued explication of racist discourses, the blues were viewed as somehow separate from ‘respectable’ forms of society and history.

These notions of the primitive were also exacerbated by the rise of Egyptomania in America during the early twentieth century. In this shift from being “a slave” to “a worker”, Hughes invokes imagery of the pyramids and directly associates them with the great

wonders of the ancient and modern world; “Under my hands the pyramids arose./ I made mortar for the Woolworth building.” The Woolworth building and the rapid expanse of American urban locales throughout the twentieth century simply represented further attempts to dissociate blackness from the expansion of civilization and the history of the nation, both past and present. With notions of primitivism firmly entrenched in public discourse and Egypt fading as a sign of national identity, the permutation of Egyptian images, figures, films, jewelry, and hieroglyphics became an important site for the reclamation of African-American identity²². What was a form of entertainment for white audiences became a powerful representation of a history denied by white society. As Arthur Schomburg noted in his argument for the continued collection of African and African-American history, “the bigotry of civilization which is the taproot of intellectual prejudice begins far back and must be corrected at its source...The Negro has been a man without a history because he has been considered a man without a worthy culture” (237). Egypt becomes a site of further appropriation and imposed exile, a place that parallels the state of modern culture and its continued attempts to erase African-Americans contributions to its development.

Combined with his prevailing interest in the genealogies and cultural implications of Egypt, these imaginative interpretations of the players, dancers, and patrons of Harlem present a vision of the secular and spiritual as much more closely aligned than previously presented. This is most clearly demonstrated in his later iterations of Eve and Cleopatra in which he blurs the distinction between the spiritual and the secular in an attempt to create

²² Adopted by Americans throughout the nineteenth century, “the image of Egypt had been deliberately co-opted to express national and imperial power, wealth, wisdom, and technological superiority...Egypt was the root of all human progress” (Giguere 6).

a self-reflexive and invaluable record of African and African-American cultural history. Once again a transnational gesture, Hughes states, “All the way from Africa to Georgia/ I carried my sorrow songs./ I made ragtime.” A historical progression that occurred over nearly two hundred years and is compressed into two short stanzas, these musical forms, as several scholars have noted, reflected the changing state of African-American life throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Black aesthetics were not lost, but transformed, “carried” from “Africa to Georgia”, and into urban locales across the country. Hughes is determined to demonstrate that progression, to make it apparent that the transcendence of the spirituals was not lost, but simply modified to reflect a modern sensibility and identity. Therefore, the secular and spiritual complexities of life are not dissociated, but recognized for their representational dependence on one another. Figures of Eve and Cleopatra are brought into conversation with one another and associations between the rivers of Babylon and the jazz cabaret take on new significance. The sensibilities of the dancers, the jazz players, the audience members, and the music challenge classic interpretations of the Bible and notions of spirituality as it emerges in cultural expression and popular discourse.

However, none of these revelations are wholly apparent until Hughes takes up these topics and transforms them through the blues nexus. While his final acknowledgment is of that as “a victim/ The Belgians cut off my hands in the Congo./They lynch me now in Texas”, the whole volume works to complicate the realities of every subject position presented in the “Proem.” Echoing the Harlem Renaissance’s attempts to rethink African-American subjectivity through the projection and promotion of the New Negro, *The Weary Blues* focuses on a community no longer willing to accept proscriptions from the outside,

but who will define themselves and their histories on their own terms. This process of reidentification emerges, as Nathaniel Mackey describes in his article “Other: From Noun to Verb,” at the intersection between artistic and social othering. While “artistic othering has to do with innovation, invention, and change, upon which cultural health depend on thrive”, social othering “has to do with power, exclusion, and privilege, the centralizing of a norm against which otherness is measured, meted out, marginalized” (52). To rob African-Americans of their innovative and inventive capacities through appropriation, containment, financial exploitation, and the denial of agency transforms an understanding of African-American culture from “verb to noun” (52). Yet, African-American culture, despite being sterilized, or presented as somehow less inventive or less dynamic, has continued to produce artists who react time and time again with the verb principle, or the active and activating force that reflects black creativity. As Mackey notes, “the dismantling of the unified subject found in recent critical theory is old news when it comes to music” (60). Invention and reinvention, expression both within and beyond the confines of the self and the form, are the foundation of black aesthetic practice. Through the intersection between poetry and blues, Hughes exposes new generic paradigms, new methods of writing experience in ways well known to African-American musicians and orators. As Mackey notes:

...black writers tend to be read racially, primarily at the content level, the noun level, as responding to racism, representing the ‘black experience.’ That black writers have been experimentally and innovatively engaged with the medium, addressing issues of form as well as issues of content, tends to be ignored. The ability to impact upon and to influence the form of the medium,

to *move* the medium, entails an order of animacy granted only to whites when it comes to writing. (Mackey 68)

Through form and content, Hughes' activates agency for himself and his multifarious speakers. He breaks the stasis, the restricted subjectivity of the past and opens it up to the creativity of the present, to the world of the modern individual. The "Proem" presents his theories of historical compression and temporal association, but ultimately falls into a standardized and static representation of culture. I contend that he does this intentionally, that he sets his audience up with a straightforward relation of history, only to then begin improvising, reimagining, reclaiming, and reinventing the genre he works within and the culture he discusses. Rather than demonizing his subjects or perpetuating stifling social perceptions, Hughes volume offers endless interpretations of the African-American subject, their relationship to the past, and their rapid transition into American modernity. The blues were not static representations, but vessels for encoded content, a way of understanding the genre "as it refers to a number of different entities—an emotion, a technique, a musical form, and a song lyric" (Tracy 59). As W.C. Handy notes in his 1926 anthology of the blues "Such titles as *The Weary Blues* and *Worried Blues* were probably merely generic...for by that time...the blues were essentially a mold—filled, emptied and replenished, so easy to fill that little trouble was taken filling it. It remained for one musician to take it up, to attempt to put into it something of lasting value" (20). Every poem in the volume is Hughes' individual exploration of the concept, his attempt to take up the major discursive and aesthetic expression of the period and, through the use of poetry, "put into it something of lasting value."

“The Weary Blues”, Harlem Cabarets, and the Deconstruction of the Ancient Past

While the volume’s title gestures towards the blues as a metaphor for African-American life at the turn of the century, the title poem ushers the reader into the individual spaces and sounds that constitute the blues aesthetic. Based on a widely known tune that Hughes first heard while living in Kansas with his grandmother²³, “The Weary Blues” offers a revolutionary interpretation of the relationship between the blues aesthetic and poetry. As scholar Steven Tracy has discussed, the technical mastery of the poem, the influence of eight and twelve-bars blues, and the deployment of oral resources for genre specificity is simply astonishing²⁴. Yet, Hughes ability “to *move* the medium”(68), as Nathaniel Mackey describes, emerges from both from his technical manipulation of form and his ability to offer another perspective on his content. Hughes persona-based enactment of this blues scene establishes how the vacillation between descriptions of space, the replication of lyrics, and the observations of the unidentified narrator all contribute to reimagining of blues content and its relationship to a number of physical and psychological environments. In particular, the early stanzas are motivated by the mood and cadence of the singer as well as the space in which he performs:

Droning a drowsy syncopated tune,
 Rocking back and forth to a mellow croon,
 I heard a Negro play.
 Down on Lenox Avenue the other night
 By the dull pallor of an old gas light
 He did a lazy sway....

²³ See Arnold Rampersad’s, *The Life of Langston Hughes* (1986), pgs. 15-18 for more information on Hughes youth and the powerful intersections between the blues and spirituality he drew upon for inspiration later.

²⁴ See Stephen Tracy’s “To the Tune of Those Weary Blues: The Influence of Blues Tradition in Langston Hughes’s Blues Poems” (1993) for these detailed readings.

He did a lazy sway....
To the tune o' those Weary Blues. (23)

Hughes knows the reader may be familiar with the tune, but perhaps unfamiliar with the spaces it emerges from or the subtle ways it emotionally engages the audience. The “dull pallor of the old gas light” and the easy movement of the man he observes touch on two aspects of blues performance that cannot be communicated through lyrics alone: physical space and emotional attitude. The expansion and contraction of the lines capture the cadence of the song, freeing the narrator to discuss the relationship between the performer and the individual. This deployment of technical skill to make space for the commentary of the poetic persona is foundational to *The Weary Blues*; it allows Hughes to freely explore the space of the club and its relationship to discourses both within and outside its bounds. The narrator is not simply observing the singer, but commenting on the singer and the narrator’s reactions to the music:

With his ebony hands on each ivory key
He made that poor piano moan with melody.
 O Blues!
Swaying to and fro on his rickety stool
He played that sad raggy tune like a musical fool.
 Sweet Blues!
Coming from a black man’s soul.
 O Blues! (Hughes 23)

These lines maintain the visual detail and poetic melody of the early sections, but now shift towards the narrator’s reactions to the sounds of the piano and the inspired movement of the performer. The voice that drives the poem is necessarily unidentified and unidentifiable; it could represent a moment of inspired reaction or just as easily be read as “the experience of a poet hearing a blues singer and understanding at bottom what they mean” (Tracy 85). Vacillating between happiness and sadness, between the love for the

music and the experiences that transform a “sad raggy tune” into the reflection of “a black man’s soul”, the narrator’s intermittent exhortations of “O Blues!...Sweet Blues!...O Blues!” speaks to the paradoxes of African-American life at that time. This reflects Hughes desire to not only present the blues to his audience, but to creatively describe their relationship to the social, political, economic, and cultural experiences from which they emerge. It is only after this context is established that Hughes integrates the unimpeded voice of the singer:

“I got the Weary Blues
And I can’t be satisfied.
Got the Weary Blues
And can’t be satisfied—
I ain’t happy no mo’
And wish that I had died.” (23)

His song is a repetition of past experiences, an observation on the present, and a longing for a future in which he is free from his blues. Having realized that his moments of joy were temporary and fleeting, the singer describes the troubles he must carry in their absence. Although he mentions the release of death, his “wish” is only a longing for happiness, a desire to be satisfied in this life and, as he says a stanza earlier, “put ma troubles on the shelf.” However, as the narrator describes, the blues singer carries these emotions far beyond the stage. His experiences catalyze his performance, but they also follow him long after the song is complete. As Hughes writes:

And far into the night he crooned that tune.
The stars went out and so did the moon.
The singer stopped playing and went to bed
While the Weary Blues echoed through his head.
He slept like a rock or a man that’s dead. (24)

The singer’s blues follow him beyond the confines of the Lenox Avenue bar, into his home, and even into his sleep. It is not just the lyrics, but the remembrance of their origins that echo over and over again in his head. The memories and the blues song that captures their

emotion do not stop “playing” until he goes to bed, and even then, there is no indication the blues are eradicated from his psyche. The singer either succumbs to his blues and loses the capacity for feeling, or he wakes only to find that the repetitive catharsis of his songs is what gives him life. A pointed example of how poetic persona highlights the individual player’s process of replicating and reinventing experience through song, “The Weary Blues” is a microcosm of how blues aesthetics inflect the volume throughout. While the exhortations of the narrator gesture towards the collective, but never fully explicate the histories and experiences that connect the player to the audience, as the volume unfolds the reclamations and reinventions of the past begin to expand beyond the confines of the player and into a variety of historical and temporal geographies.

In fact, the very next poem in the volume is titled “Jazzonia”, which is an intentional compression of a modern musical genre with a referent to the Babylonia exile. Throughout the volume, and particularly in the first fifteen poems, blues and jazz become a challenge to the common belief in “God as the opposite of the Devil, religion as the not-secular, and the secular as largely sexual” (Davis 6). However, this common understanding of the secular and the spiritual being largely divided throughout the Harlem Renaissance is more a convenient account than an accurate reflection of the various ways, both positive and negative, that writers engaged with religious tropes, images, and narratives throughout the period²⁵. While the Old Testament imagery of Moses leading his people to the Promised Land carried great symbolic weight for African-Americans during the nineteenth century,

²⁵ As scholar Steve Pinkerton notes in his fascinating piece . ““New Negro” v. “Niggeratti”: Defining and Defiling the Black Messiah”, Harlem Renaissance writers including Alain Locke, Sterling Brown, Zora Neale Hurston, Countee Cullen, and artists such as Aaron Douglas, Richard Bruce Nugent, and Winold Reiss all engaged in the reinvention of Biblical imagery during the period.

Harlem Renaissance writers were searching for new paradigms of spirituality. They desired the sacred, but “their texts nonetheless betray far less reverent notion about how to get there”. Opposed to formulations of the New Negro that emphasized the spirit while ignoring or shaming the body, writers such as Wallace Thurman, Countee Cullen, Bruce Nugent, and Langston Hughes sought to create spaces “where boundaries and limits become porous, where sacred and profane, angelic and forbidden, are allowed to interpenetrate and meld”. (Pinkerton 551) This new secular spirituality did not shun sexuality, but embraced its expression and explored its discursive limits. New visions of black identity required new prophecies and Langston Hughes, as we will see in “Jazzonia” and “Harlem Night Club”, presented the blues as their mediator.

A gesture towards the psychological repercussions of displacement, “Jazzonia” parallels the exile of the Jews in Babylonia with the blues cabaret and the misunderstanding of the black cultural expression by those outside the community. If we place Psalms 137, verses 1-4 side by side with the first eight lines of Hughes’ poem, immediate correlatives emerge:

By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept
 when we remembered Zion.
 There on the poplars
 we hung our harps,
 for there our captors asked us for songs,
 our tormentors demanded songs of joy;
 they said, “Sing us one of the songs of Zion!”
 How can we sing the songs of the Lord
 while in a foreign land? (NIV)

Oh, silver tree!
 Oh, shining rivers of the soul!

In a Harlem cabaret
 Six long-headed jazzers play.
 A dancing girl whose eyes are bold
 Lifts high a dress of silken gold.

Oh, singing tree!
 Oh, shining rivers of the soul!
 (*The Weary Blues* 25)

A site of exile²⁶ and an example of captors cruelly appropriating and desiring the songs of those they do not understand, Babylonia becomes Hughes metaphor for America's relationship to their own former captives. The space of cabaret, similar to the "shining rivers" of Babylon is symbolic of cultural freedom and physical entrapment. It incites a remembrance of things past and a cynicism about their music or movements being fairly interpreted by the white community. The metaphor of the river also alludes to the depth and movement of the captive community's soul and the ceaseless pattern of captors who demand "songs of joy" without acknowledging that they are tinged with the sorrow of exile and captivity. As Psalms beautifully describes, "How can we sing the songs of the Lord/ while in a foreign land? The Jewish captives are not concerned with otherworldly escape, but with their ability to communicate the fundamental paradoxes that bind a person to their own culture, even as it is mocked, misunderstood, and appropriated.

A counterpoint to the vaguely described players and the misinterpretation of their music, Hughes focuses on a young, black dancer whose eyes emanate a strength and assurance that can only be matched by the "silken gold" of the dress she wears. In the face of middle-class propriety that would not accept the look, the dress, or the "lift" of her dress, the female dancer is represented as using her sexuality as a form of resistance. The narrator's interpretation of the woman, when surrounded by the metaphor of exile, not only challenges discourses of respectability, but also allows the poem's metaphors to 'move' the woman from sexual object into a sign of spiritual reverence. The dancer's ability to act without being acted upon, to control the space she occupies rather than being

²⁶ Bruce M. Metzger and Michael Coogan's explanation of this section of Psalms finds that, "Exile as a place was Babylonia...the interchangeable Hebrew terms for exile are *gôlâ* and *gâlût*, generally rendered in Septuagint as 'captivity' or 'deportation.'

controlled by it is a revolutionary image of secular spirituality and a challenge to the supposed “moral chaos that occurs when social bonds and normative values are not cohesively maintained within a community” (Vogel 10). The dancer is not presented as a proprietor of sin, but as central to the image of the cabaret and subversive in her control of mind (“eyes of bold”) and body (“lifts high a dress”).

This parallel between Biblical narrative and the space of the cabaret is further complicated by Hughes placement of the dancer in a lineage that includes Eve and Cleopatra. After a second exhortation of the opening lines (with slight variation), Hughes states:

Were Eve’s eyes
In the first garden
Just a bit too bold?
Was Cleopatra gorgeous
In a gown of gold? (25)

Hughes presentation of Eve and Cleopatra as directly associated with the dancer and the modification of those descriptions through rhetorical questions destabilizes narratives that surround all of these female bodies²⁷. As figures historically associated with the moral degradation of mankind and the fall of the Roman Empire, Eve and Cleopatra were touchstones for the intersection between race, gender, Biblical narrative, and ancient history. The image of Eve eating the forbidden fruit, which was widely circulated by male religious historians as a sign of female gullibility and weakness, willfully ignored other interpretations of the Bible, particularly those that view Eve as vital to the “ongoing process of world order” (Newsome 16). Instead of presenting the dancer as the bringer of

²⁷ Similar to the patterns Marianna Torgovnick (1990) outlines, the common myths associated with these women are “typical indeed of Western thinking about the primitive...fantastic, collective (‘all women are alike’), seductive, dangerous, deadly” (156).

sin and death into the world, Hughes associates her with an alternative conception of Eve, with a belief “that to be the curious one, the seeker of knowledge, the tester of limits, is to be quintessentially human” (17). In asking if her eyes were “just a bit too bold?”, the dancer is not condemned, but emblematic of historically persistent narratives that seek to irrationally suppress the female “seeker of knowledge” and “bringer of culture” (Newsome 17). Once again, Hughes does not focus on spirituality as understood in the afterlife, but integrates his vision of transcendence into his understanding of blues culture and blues aesthetics.

This effort to control the narratives surrounding female bodies and in particular black female bodies becomes even more apparent as Hughes extends his lineage into a discussion of Cleopatra. Presented as white and Greek when associated with “art, science, knowledge, wit, and, pointedly, ‘culture’ itself” (Trafton 177) and darker of skin when discussing her affair with Antony and the downfall of the Roman empire, Cleopatra’s image as impulsive, opulent, and a sign of Eastern exotica was shaped to satisfy the gender prejudice and racial ambivalence of American and European historians.²⁸ To ask if Cleopatra “was gorgeous in a gown of gold?” and do so as a formal modification of his description of a black female dancer, questions the perpetual historical construction of women as either pure, promiscuous, or proprietors of sin and death. An intersection between American Egyptomania at the turn of the century and nineteenth century constructions of primitivism, Cleopatra’s image was frequently circulated and overwhelmingly negative in its portrayal of women and the African continent. Similar to

²⁸ Having threatened Rome’s dominance, she was often “depicted as competing for authority and ultimate victory...So after her defeat, Augustan epic and elegy presented her as a conquered adversary of the *res publica*, a drunken Egyptian whore”(Riad 832).

the fetishized ethnography of ‘primitive’ cultures, Cleopatra, “as a figure of racial ambiguity, social deviation, and sexual inversion...is regularly examined, repeatedly pathologized, and repeatedly undressed” (Trafton 176) by white western culture.²⁹ A signal of the ways American culture appropriated negative images of a racial other to further propagate nineteenth century bifurcations of race and gender, Cleopatra is both exotic and modern, primitive and a symbol of a sexual empowerment. “Jazzonia” collapses these categories and, through a combination of spiritual and secular imagery, embraces the blues and Cleopatra as signs of artistic and avant-garde modernity³⁰.

As a site temporarily freed from heteronormative or heterogeneous discourses of morality, the cabaret and Hughes images of Eve also contain a complex negotiation between what Shane Vogel identifies as the “uplift body” and the “primitive body”. The space of cabaret also has a pronounced importance throughout the first section, as Hughes offers a glimpse into the spaces of blues culture “that are not legible or recognized as valid by dominant discourses and social institutions” (Vogel 22). Opening his poem “Harlem Night Club” with a nod to the increasing tempo and energy of a jazz song, Hughes then immediately shifts to detailed descriptions of the interracial intimacies and exploratory possibilities of the Harlem cabaret.

Sleek black boys in a cabaret.
Jazz-band, jazz-band,—
Play, pLAY, PLAY!

²⁹ As scholar Antonia Lant discusses, five films versions of Cleopatra were made between 1908-1918 alone, many of which dealt presented Cleopatra as a sexualized image of treachery.

³⁰ As scholar Rachel Farebrother(2013) notes, “In the context of a broader retrieval of the African past among historians and social scientists, Egyptian motifs, such as pyramids and hieroglyphics, became a symbol for assertions of African-American cultural distinctiveness...African-Americans turned to ancient Egyptian splendor as a mythic site of origin, but also bears the signs and strains of efforts to develop ‘inquiry’, association, and activism across the color line” (225).

White girls' eyes
 Call gay black boys.
 Black boys' lips
 Grin jungle joys.

Dark brown girls
 In blonde men's arms.
 Jazz-band, jazz-band,—
 Sing Eve's charms! (*The Weary Blues* 32)

Eve is once again invoked, but this time as metaphor for jazz and its potential to reshape theological narrative. Not simply a spiritual descendent of God, she is God made flesh and to deny her of the flesh is to deny her, in some ways, of her humanity. Her desire to explore the bounds of societal restrictions, to explain the pleasures and pain of this world, is reflected in the exhortation (and metaphor) of the narrator as he implores the band to “Sing Eve’s charms!” The blues, with its attention to lived paradox, embraces the dichotomies of human existence and troubles the boundaries between proscriptive narratives of good/evil, black/white, respectability/sexuality. They also do so repetitively and ritualistically; each song is a variation of the last and each improvisation is a contribution to the individual identity of the player and collective identity of the community. As scholar John Barton notes in his discussion of Eve’s fall from grace, “the eating of the fruit is not a single event of the remote past, but something that is repeated again and again in human history” (43). Rather than shape Eve’s narrative as that of a distant, static, and cautionary tale of sin and its temptations, Hughes presents her as embodied in the sounds of the blues and modified by the discourses that shape its performance and reception.

A discussion of how the popular discursive identification of the body in public space often served to reinforce notions of respectability or the primitive Other, Vogel’s argument

creates parallels between the “complex negotiations and contradictions” of the music and self-identification in modernity.

What we find in Harlem’s cabaret is not the uplift body—the body of proper sexual expenditure, middle-class comportment, and unviolated surfaces—nor the primitive body—the body that exists within the gaze of white spectatorial privilege and violence, the body of sexual excess, racial parody, and appropriable identity. We find instead bodies and subjects that undertake the complex negotiations and contradictions of sexual and racial self-definition in American modernity. (18)

Despite their innocuous behavior (calling for one another and dancing together), the interracial couples are visually indicted as primitive, as betraying the modernity of ‘civilized’, or raced and gendered, behavior. However, Hughes refuses to reduce his narrative of the nightclub to images of “spectatorial privilege” or “sexual excess” (20) assigned primitivism. Rather, the “Black boy’s lips” who “Grin jungle joys” and the “Dark brown girls/ In blonde men’s arms” challenge modernity as a political, social, economic, and aesthetic discourse of difference.³¹ The dancers are presented as foils to modernity as it was perpetuated by Jim Crow politics and antiquated notions of morality. These images of primitivism destabilize definitions of modernity, particularly those that require discourses of difference and representations of historical stasis to thrive. As Hughes

³¹ As scholar Elizabeth Steeby discusses, “Jim Crow was a system that both precluded and produced intimacies—some realized through contact, others cultivated and lived solely in the realm of fantasy...Only a very particular set of relationships would be condoned (with legitimacy reserved for heterosexual interactions between gender normative white men and women), while a vast array of behaviors and points of contact were designated as abnormal, unacceptable, and punishable perhaps to the point of death. (128)

describes in the final lines, the “primitive” must be embraced as a symbol of suspended presumption, of an American modernity yet to be discovered.

White ones, brown ones
 What do you know
 About tomorrow
 Where all paths go?

Jazz boys, jazz-boys,—
 Play, pLAY, PLAY!
 Tomorrow...is darkness.
 Joy today! (32)

Hughes encourages the audience to embrace the present as a way of writing the future and rewriting the past. A counterpoint to the metaphoric “darkness” of Jim Crow laws and an illuminating challenge to middle-class respectability politics, Langston Hughes cabaret troubles the discourses that transform the space into a static representation of the primitive or a seedy representation of the modern. As will be seen in Hughes poems on blues dancers, the cabaret is not a site of stasis, but a bridge into the past that refuses to abandon the immediacy and innovation of the present.

This is especially important when considering how Hughes’ volume reenacts the “dynamic suggestion” (Hurstons 35) of the blues through the histories of black vernacular culture. As Zora Neale Hurston describes, African-American dancers captured the audience through “compelling insinuation” and “realistic suggestion” (35). They hold the audience rapt because each individual “is participating in the performance himself—carrying out the suggestions of the performer” (35). The dancers become an extension of the audience’s own desires, their own wishes to either replicate, repudiate, or engage with the performance in front of them. With the exact movement of the dancers difficult to describe, Hughes turns to vernacular culture to replicate the intricacies of dance performance and multiple interpretations it elicits from the audience.

“Me an’ ma baby’s
 Got two mo’ ways,
 Two mo’ ways to do de buck!
 Da, da,
 Da, da, da!
 Two mo’ ways to do de buck!”

Soft light on the tables,
 Music gay,
 Brown-skin steppers
 In a cabaret.

White folks laugh!
 White folks pray! (26)

In contrast to their physical surrounding, the dancers are described in a language of activity and a process of invention. The “two mo’ ways” these dancers have created to “do de buck” can initially be read as a dance move, but also doubles as a reference to sexual technique. This vernacular approach, which simultaneously suggests a public and private act, can be traced the ways “black folk, both in slavery and out, took English and made it their own replete with codes and calls of which whites were largely unaware or did not know how to respond to” (Young 100). A de facto representation of racial discourse during the period, the patrons either laugh at the performance as a spectacle of the primitive black body or they shy away in fear they may replicate the movements and defile their privileged status. A shift from verb to noun and back to verb again, the final stanza of the poem return to nuance of double entendre and the intricacy of black vernacular culture: “Me an’ ma baby’s/ Got two mo’ ways,/ Two mo’ ways to do de buck!” (26).

For Hughes, these dancers, and their linguistic and aesthetic codes, are a necessary corrective to the harsh and sterile conditions of the city. They capture the spirit of the age,

the restless pace of machine aesthetics, and the necessity of music, dance, and art as a counterpoint to the era's methods of commercialization and homogenization.³²

Transforming metaphors of the "Dark Continent" into both symbols of power and interrogations of racist discourse at home and abroad, Hughes continues his persistent focus on female characters in "Nude Young Dancer." A juxtaposition of the primitive and the modern, this dancer is yet another example of Hughes desire to reclaim historical narrative through an engagement with the intricacies of an imagined past and a living present:

What jungle tree have you slept under.
Midnight dancer of the jazzy hour?
What great forest has hung its perfume
Like a sweet veil above your bower?

What jungle tree have you slept under,
Night-dark girl of the swaying hips?
What star-white moon has been your mother?
To what clean boy have you offered your lips? (33)

A metaphor for both the powerful, imagined past of African-Americans and the presumptions about that past by Euro-American culture, the jungle represents a cultural lineage that the narrator associates with reverence and respect rather than uncontrollable desire. The veil and the whiteness of the moon suggest that the woman, even in her nudity, cannot be easily reduced to the hyper-sexualized imagery of the primitive. She dances at the division between night and day, embracing the indefinable space between primitive and modern, between the "sweet veil", "swaying hips, and "star-white moon" that are her ancestors and the discourses of modernity that define her relation to them. Her identity

³² See Joel Dinerstein (2003) for more on machine aesthetics and Thomas Holt (2000) for a detailed description of Fordism and its impact on consumer culture during the early twentieth century.

contains sexuality, but it is not reducible to that estimation alone. In fact, in the final lines, it is she that controls access to her body and not the observer. As scholar Anne Borden discusses, “Imagery of nakedness is heavy in Hughes’s discussions of women’s identity struggles, suggesting an awareness of women’s sexuality as a site of resistance” (340). The woman’s lineage, although having roots in the landscapes of Africa, is far removed from the denigrating voyeurism of white audiences. Rather, she is indicative of a transatlantic exchange and a discourse of primitivism that was transformed in the journey of slaves from Africa to America, and in the journeys of the working class to urban centers across the United States.

Hughes Travel Poems, Transatlantic Exchange, and the Myth of the “Dark Continent”

Although many of the poems following his opening section were written during Hughes earlier travels, he takes care to arrange the volume as a transnational journey that begins in the heart of blues culture and ends upon his return from Europe and Africa. Transient for much of his adult life and aching for new experiences in his youth, Hughes early poetry reflects the desire for psychological freedom and physical mobility that motivated the Great Migration. With an estimated 1.5 million people flocking to urban centers across America, the blues became a source of African-American social and cultural record, charting the “perpetually elusive guarantees of security and happiness” (Davis 19) that came with these changes. While scenes of musical performance are rare in the later sections, what can be noted is how Hughes’ early interpretations of history, folklore, travel, and racial injustice would influence his understanding of the blues and their relationship to the wide range

national and international spaces that will follow. In fact, it could be said that Hughes' arrangement of the volume after the opening blues poems, including his inclusion of several poems about the South and his journey into Africa, constitute a reimagining (and reversal) of the Great Migration and the Middle Passage.

"The South", which deals directly with the "lazy, laughing", "sunny-faced", "child-minded" region, aggressively outlines the relationship between Southern sensibilities and understandings of race in modernity. The region is not indicted as a space, as can be seen in the poem's beautiful treatment of landscape³³, it is critiqued as an attitude or a "spell" that must be broken before the future can break free from the constraints of the past. No longer able to execute the specific violences of slavery, the South has "Blood on its mouth" and spends its time "Scratching in the dead fire's ashes/ For a Negro's bones" (54). Unable to resurrect the "Beast-strong" and "idiot-brained" intricacies of slavery, Southerners are presented as digging through ashes "for a Negro's bones." A reference to the ashes, or discourses of slavery, and their place in justifying the spectacle of lynching in the present, this imagery openly opposes any further acts of victimization. Instead, Hughes shifts his attention to the denigration of their former owners by juxtaposing the "honey-lipped, syphilitic" behaviors of the South and those African-Americans "who would love her/ But she spits in my face" (54). No longer willing to endure the "passionate, cruel" whims of the Southern disposition, the narrator describes the hope of something better, of an opportunity to go northward, where "my children/ may escape the spell of the South" (54).

³³ "Cotton and the moon,/ Warmth, earth, warmth,/ The sky, the sun, the stars,/ The magnolia-scented South." (54)

Yet, this “spell” isn’t easy to break. Hughes lingers in the South for several more poems, intent on engaging with slavery as it is understood in a modern context.

A reference to both the symbol of Christian sacrifice and the inter-racial relations that permeated the South during slavery, Hughes poem “Cross” subtly references inter-racial rapes during slavery and their consequences for those sons and daughters of the Great Migration and the Harlem Renaissance. The poem, whose narrator is half-white and half-black, does not deplore his condition, but presents his background as a source of instability and uncertainty.

My old man’s a white old man
 And my old mother’s black.
 If ever I cursed my white old man
 I take my curses back.

If ever I cursed my black old mother
 And wished she were in hell,
 I’m sorry for that evil wish
 And now I wish her well.

My old man died in a fine big house.
 My ma died in a shack.
 I wonder where I’m gonna die,
 Being neither white nor black? (52)

A racial hybrid, the speaker has spent most of his life wondering whom he should be upset with for his strange origins. Should he be upset with the “white old man” who made his existence untenable or his “black old mother” for being unable to provide the protection or answers he desires? More than simply a reference to the narrator’s own struggles, the repeated use of “old” (and not in the vernacular form, which is associated with endearment or close association) suggests a relationship between the individual and the community, between the history of interracial rape and the paradoxes of modernity. Seemingly exhausted with the anger each produces, the speaker instead turns to another question, “I

wonder where I'm gonna die,/ Being neither white nor black?". A record of change and continuity, the poem reveals both the rejection of victimization in the nineteenth century and the perpetuation of racist discourses well into the dawn of the Harlem Renaissance. Despite the fact that many authors felt slavery was only a hindrance to the emergence of the 'New Negro', as scholar Deborah McDowell notes, "the insistent pronouncement that a new day had dawned/was dawning for African-Americans seemed at times to be more fantasy than fact. A mere sixty years in the distance, slavery's legacies, even its psychic legacies, could not be easily exorcised" (165). Hughes' juxtaposition of the house and the shack and his return to the South as an imaginative landscape that impedes on African-Americans' perceptions of self-worth indicates an interest in reclaiming trauma as a site of empowerment. The narrator knows he cannot completely eradicate his past and indicates a willingness to forgive his 'parents', even as he wonders how their legacy will impact him in the future.

In a shift away from the cabarets of Harlem and out of the debilitating discourses and violence of the South, Hughes' final sections address the relationship between national and transnational narratives of race. These black Atlantic exchanges, which are semi-autobiographical accounts of Hughes' travels to Africa and Europe, contain what Paul Gilroy discusses as "those hidden expressions, both residual and emergent, that attempt to be global or outer-national in character" (16). Echoing the transient lifestyle of the blues player and the genre's incessant creation and recreation of the self, Hughes dedicates an entire section of poems to his time crossing the Atlantic and his observations from deck and shore. With an excitement for the journey ahead, Hughes writes "A Farewell", describing how he has set out "With gypsies and sailors,/Wanderers of the hills and seas,/ I

will go to seek my fortune./With pious folk and fair/ I must have a parting.” (*The Weary Blues* 72). Immediately identifying him self with outcasts and the working class, Hughes embraces those marginalized and misunderstood populations who, like the blues singers and dancers in the cabaret, are “providing resonance for experience’s multiplicities” (Baker 7). In contrast to the “pious” and “fair” Americans who would restrict his movement and reject his lifestyle, Hughes embraces his marginality and the potential for knowledge it provides: “But you will never miss me—/You who live between the hills/ And have never seen the seas.” A reconsideration of the Middle Passage and the journey from Africa to the Americas, the narrator returns to the ocean with a renewed sense of pride. He is now exploring his ancestry rather than being torn from it and travelling to Europe with hopes of learning more about himself and America.

This journey across the ocean allows Hughes to start again, to have agency over his history and identity. As Hughes describes in his autobiography *The Big Sea* (1940), on his first journey to Africa, he took all of his books (notably saving only *Leaves of Grass*) and

Threw them overboard. It was like throwing a million bricks out of my heart—for it wasn’t only the books I wanted to throw away, but everything unpleasant and miserable out of my past:...the stupidities of color-prejudice, black in a white world, the fear of not finding a job, the bewilderment of no one to talk to about things that trouble you, the feeling of always being controlled by others—by parents, by employers, by some outer necessity not your own. (98)

His books are symbolic of all the histories, emotions, prejudices, and means of control that prevented him from reaching his full capability. To throw them overboard is a chance to

reevaluate the present in light of the past. Representative of an interstitial space between entrapment and freedom, between the psychological damages of the past and new visions for the future, the sea becomes a reclamation of the Middle Passage and an exploration of its intimacies. Hughes loses his books, but in return finds, as can be seen in his poem “Long Trip”, that the ocean has the ability to complicate even one’s most basic understandings of reality:

The sea is a wilderness of waves,
A desert of water.
We dip and dive,
Rise and roll,
Hide and are hidden
On the sea.
Day, night,
Night, day,
The sea is a wilderness of waves,
A wilderness of water. (73)

An eerie recollection of the physical and psychological consequences of going on a long journey across the Atlantic, this poem is bereft of the enthusiasm Hughes demonstrated in his earlier “A Farewell.” Surrounded by “a desert of water” and dealing with the disorienting motions of the sea, the people on the boat cannot discern between “Day, night/ Night, day”. Stifled by their inability to describe the weather, much less the course being sailed or the journeys that await them upon arrival, the passengers are simply left with a feeling of endless repetition and ceaseless maneuver. Described by Homi Bhabha as a state of “in-between” and Paul Gilroy as “the black Atlantic,” these movements characterize spaces that are “both residual and emergent, that attempt to be global or outer-national in character” (Gilroy 16). Caught between national and international borders, Hughes describes the feelings of physical and psychic disorientation associated with the many black bodies that traveled between international borders. His uneasy relationship to

America is set aside in favor of poems that are populated by figures and spaces that have historic correlatives in national and transnational narratives of race. This process of reconfiguration, or temporal interruption, as Homi Bhabha outlines, creates a profound impact on how we view history as an ongoing process:

The borderline work of culture demands a 'newness' that is not part of the continuum of past and present. It creates a sense of the new as an insurgent act of cultural translation. Such art does not merely recall the past as social cause or aesthetic precedent; it renews the past, refiguring it as a contingent 'in-between' space, that innovates and interrupts the performance of the present. (10)

Hughes "insurgent act of cultural translation" emerges first in his arrangement of the volume; his steady movement from the center of blues culture into Europe and finally to Africa offers an opportunity to integrate blues aesthetics while still being able to address its antecedents in cultures that extend far beyond its borders. This distillation of the relationships between African-American musical culture and transnational folklores creates historical correlatives across time and space.

Populated by gypsies, sailors, seascapes, prostitutes, beggars, market women, the sick, suicidal, and young in love, Hughes' impressions of Europe reflect his interest in the working class and those consider outsiders in 'civilized' society. This is particularly apparent in his treatments of Pierrot, a tragicomic figure of a clown that was widely popular in nineteenth century French culture. Inspired by French modernist Jules LaForgue's treatment of the figure as an ironic counterbalance to "all that was considered healthy and normal in modern bourgeois society" (Deshmukh 6), Hughes presents a section

of poems entitled “Black Pierrot.”³⁴ Vacillating between scenes of Harlem and reinterpretations of the famous figure, Hughes clearly intends to draw a parallel between the expression of the blues and Pierrot’s socially proscribed representation of “popular, lowbrow cultural forms” (Patterson 100). Questioning the division between folk expression, popular culture, and high art, Hughes turns to the moral ambiguities and paradoxes of the blues idiom. In his “Poem: To the Black Beloved”, his message thrives on incongruity, on the melding of two seemingly unlike characteristics or qualities: Oh,/ My black one,/ Thou art not good/ Yet thou hast/ A purity/ Surpassing goodness”(65). This juxtaposition questions the division between categorical imperatives such as pure/defiled and good/evil. This image not only revises the original story of Pierrot, but does so to create a direct analogy between the past and present, between the class-based ideologies of nineteenth century Western Europe and the racist ideologies of contemporary American culture.³⁵

In fact, it even raises the act of insolence or rebellion against social mores to an act of supreme “goodness.” Pierrot and the blues singer, as embodiments of lowbrow and supposedly vulgar cultural forms, become what modernity defines itself against. Hughes hopes to invert this presumption, or at the very least, demonstrate the difficulty of such binary divisions. As W.C. Handy notes in his discussion of the blues appeal:

³⁴ For more information on Hughes relationship with LaForgue’s work and his interpretation of French folk culture, see Anita Patterson’s book *Race, American Literature, and Transnational Modernisms* (2008), pgs. 95-103.

³⁵ In his section titled *A Black Pierrot* Hughes also includes an image of the European Pierrot. This poem also challenges the sexual restrictions of society and the sense of Christian propriety that leads to a soulless and loveless condition. See page 67 of *The Weary Blues*.

Memphis Blues came with a new and subtler essence; it was two-sided and, therefore, disturbing...it had a tone, not of weak despondency or shallow cuteness, but of the mocking, ironic, or defiant discontent of the old folk-blues. It is this undertone, whether represented by the blues note, or any other device, that has crept into our popular music, has enriched and still enriches it, transforming it at times from the expression of one of many superficial emotions to something of deeper and more lasting value. (Handy 40)

It is the subtle critique of the blues, the “defiant discontent” of African-Americans who are supposedly free, but must continue to confront oppressions as enacted by Jim Crow and supported by racist ideologies. This revolution in popular music was more than a sound, it was an act of rebellion, a forum for expressing individuality in a society that thrived on the homogenization and exploitation of black and brown bodies. Their ability to occupy the space between the joy and pain, the physical and the metaphysical is what leads Handy to describe their contributions to American culture as “something of deeper and more lasting value”. Elaborating on his earlier image of the famous clown, Hughes “Black Pierrot” intentionally defines a relationship between the nineteenth century folk figure and the modern blues. Done in a blues idiom, the poem recapitulates the ambiguities of Pierrot, but places in them in a contemporary context. After two stanzas of mourning his lost love, Hughes character emerges transformed, but renewed:

I am a black Pierrot:
 She did not love me,
 So with my once gay-colored soul
 Shrunken like a balloon without air,
 I went forth in the morning
 To seek a new brown love. (61)

The narrator has not forgotten how he “wept until the red dawn/ Dripped blood over the eastern hills”, he simply knows that dwelling on the lost past is no formula for understanding the present or the future. Like the singer of his opening poem, remembrance is catharsis, but continuing to play is a sign of potential relief. We do not know whether the blues singer dies or sleeps soundly in “The Weary Blues,” nor do we know if Pierrot finds his love; what the reader does know is that they keep repeating their song and keep searching for their peace.

With the title of “Our Land”, Hughes’ final section shifts towards Africa, but continues his exploration of the relationship between contemporary discourses and persistent, but false historical narratives. A juxtaposition of critique and imagistic scenes that burst with light, color, and vitality, Hughes’ final poems appropriate an imagined and primitive past as a commentary on the pernicious effects of metaphors that associate all people of color with the “Dark Continent.” As scholar Lucy Jarosz outlines in her discussion of this persistent metaphor:

Through metaphors such as the Dark Continent, African places and people appear as quintessential objects, ahistorically frozen within webs of duality such as light/dark, found/lost, life/death, civilized/savage, known/mysterious, tame/wild, and so on...Thus metaphor not only imparts information and emotion, but also confirms, legitimates, and perpetuates structures of domination and oppression such as racism, sexism, and imperialism not through coercion but through its persistence and proliferation in various discourses. (106)

Similar to his blues poems, Hughes reminds his readers that the metaphoric “Dark Continent” emerges from the prevalence of racist discourse. Through an engagement with

and devotion to the beauty and power of the African landscape, Hughes is able to outline the physical and psychological potentialities that are wiped out by the racist “webs of duality” Jarosz describes. This transforms the “Dark Continent” into a moving metaphor, or a site that transforms the “ahistorically frozen” subjects of the past into a critique of both primitivism and modernity as discursive categories. Opening “Our Land” with a sense of longing and a desire for the recovery of one’s past, Hughes states, “We should have a land of sun,/ Of gorgeous sun/...Of rose and gold,/ And not this land where life is cold” (*The Weary Blues* 99). In contrast to the “cold” of modern society, Hughes describes a place of light, warmth, and color, a space that embraces the diversity of life. Rather than transforming America into a “land where birds are grey”, Hughes calls for “a land of trees,/ Of tall thick trees/ Bowed down with chattering parrots”. This description of Africa and presentation of scenes associated with primitivism are embraced as a correlative and corrective to white, western society. It is no longer a land of savage impulse and dying civilizations, but a land “Of love and joy and wine and song,/ And not this land where joy is wrong” (99). Hughes is not calling for a redemption of an imaginary past so much as he is calling for a reconsideration Africa’s influence on the present and future. When the poem ends with his the narrator’s exhortation, “Oh, sweet away!/ Ah, my beloved one, away!” Hughes is calling for both a return to the joy of the past and a move away from the stultifying discourses that have misrepresented Africa.

As can be seen in the poem that immediately follows, racist conceptions of Africa were instrumental in stripping people of color, both nationally and internationally, of their subjectivity. As Hughes points out in his “Lament for Dark Peoples”, racism justified their status as a noun/object rather than a verb/subject:

I was a red man one time,
 But the white men came.
 I was a black man, too,
 But the white men came.

They drove me out of the forest.
 They took me away from the jungles.
 I lost my trees.
 I lost my silver moons.

Now they've caged me
 In the circus of civilization.
 Now I herd with the many—
 Caged in the circus of civilization. (100)

In contrast to his image of “Our Land”, or an African landscape bursting with light and life, this poem positions it as a site of transition, or a place where Europeans transformed that history into a stifling series of discursive metaphors. Simply considered “men” until “the white men came”, natives and people of color were forcibly taken or eradicated from the historical landscapes that defined their cultural and ethnic backgrounds. Speaking in a poetic persona that collapses the individual and the community, the narrator finds his/their subjectivity is no longer dictated by their own traditions and values. Instead, he/they now understand themselves to be “caged in the circus of civilization”. This metaphor of civilization as similar to a sideshow where species are displayed bereft of context and ringmasters create illusions to delight and awe the audience echoes Hughes earlier description of the cabaret where “White folks laugh!/ White folks pray!” (26). In Hughes estimation, people of color view ‘civilized’ existence as a place where they are either objects of fascination or disgust, but are objects nonetheless.

Having established a series of moving metaphors that allow him to reflect the blues in both their embodiment of literal movement and as a site through which to understand the discursive contexts that inform their reception and perception, Hughes ends his volume

with a poem written while waiting for a boat that would take him from Genoa, Italy back to New York.³⁶ Returning to the Whitmanesque, universal “I” of the “Proem”, Hughes proclaims, “I, too, sing America./ I am the darker brother.” (*The Weary Blues* 109) In contrast to America’s persistent efforts to ignore the histories that connect white communities and African-Americans, the opening lines insist on a shared history and fate. At once an individual and a representative of the community, an observer and a performer, a traveller and a poet, a writer of songs and an interpreter of their meanings, Hughes poetic persona embraces the two-ness that has come to define him, even as he challenges it basis. This voice is not simply a replication of Whitman’s influence, but an “‘I’ that not only folds ‘inward’ as Whitman asserts but ‘outward’ as well to include other selves and culture as fundamental constituents of the self” (Naylor 107). Although “they send me to eat in the kitchen/ When company comes,” Hughes’ narrator asserts that these individual instances of racism can only last so long, the future will come “like a flame”, changing not only his situation, but all of those who are physically and psychologically restrained by the color of their skin and the ideological presumptions that create an ‘other’ who is perceived as somehow less. When Hughes makes his final declaration that “I, too, am America” (109) the reader finally understands that the blues are his vehicle, not his ultimate aim. They are his bridge to the past and his path towards the future.

Conclusion

FIRE... flaming, burning, searing, and penetrating far beneath the superficial items of the flesh to boil the sluggish blood.
 FIRE... a cry of conquest in the night, warning those who sleep and revitalizing those who linger in the quiet places dozing.

³⁶ See Arnold Rampersad, *Life of Langston Hughes* (1986), pg. 95

FIRE... melting steel and iron bars, poking livid tongues between stone apertures and burning wooden opposition with a cackling chuckle of contempt.

FIRE... weaving vivid, hot designs upon an ebon bordered loom and satisfying pagan thirst for beauty unadorned...the flesh is sweet and real...the soul an inward flush of fire....Beauty? ... flesh on fire—on fire in the furnace of life blazing...

“Fy-ah,
Fy-ah, Lawd,
Fy-ah gonna burn my soul! (*Fire!!!* 1)

More than a call to “burn up a lot of the old, dead conventional Negro-white ideas of the past” (*The Big Sea* 235), *Fire!!!* was a prophetic representation of a shifting current in African-American literary and political aesthetics at the end of the 1920s and through the 30s and 40s. Already deeply entrenched in the debates between high and low culture³⁷, Langston Hughes released *The Weary Blues* (1926) to draw attention to the experiences and music of the African-American working class. The first in a series of increasingly experimental and radical writings, his debut volume focused on the dialect, folklore, music, and localities of those places and people generally hidden from view or misrepresented. While Arnold Rampersad describes the volume as saturated with “conventional lyrics about nature and loneliness, or poems in which the experience of the common black folk is framed by conventional poetic language”, he overlooks how Hughes’ use of blues form and descriptions of the working class were a natural segue into the dialect and music of *Fine Clothes the the Jew* (1927) and open radicalism of *Fire!!!*. Like his fellow contributors³⁸, Hughes understood that beneath the “superficial items” of the Harlem Renaissance; the

³⁷ See Hughes’ essay “Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain” (1926); W.E.B. DuBois’ “Criteria of Negro Art” (1926); George Schulyer’s “The Negro-Art Hokum” (1926); Zora Neale Hurston’s “Characteristics of Negro Expression” (1933) for more on the debates between high/low culture.

³⁸ Wallace Thurman was the editor, and Aaron Douglas, John P. Davis, Bruce Nugent, Zora Neale Hurston, and Gwendolyn Bennett all contributed work and money to the magazine.

popularity of the Cotton Club, the white patrons, and lavish parties, there was a people who “sleep...in the quiet places dozing.” As many African-American authors, musicians, artists, and politicians would agree with across the 1930s, it was time for a new movement to begin “burning wooden opposition with a cackling chuckle of contempt”. Although *The Messenger* (1917-1928) had been promoting materialist and socialist analysis of the black working class throughout the decade, the Great Depression and highly publicized Scottsboro Case brought these ideologies to the forefront of African-American literary and politics thought. In the 1930s, Hughes became a member of the John Reed Club in New York, travelled and worked in Russia, released his satirical stories *The Ways of White Folks* (1934), and was regularly releasing sardonic and political poems in the *New Masses*, a publication supported by the Communist Worker’s Party of America (WPA).

By the end of 1939, the non-aggression pact between the USSR and Nazi Germany had been signed, and Hughes, like many others, began to drift away from his affiliation with the Communist Party despite still being in support of socialism. As Hughes biographer Arnold Rampersad discusses, Hughes position was driven by both economics and aesthetics; “To a large extent, he gave up in radicalism not on ideological grounds, but as an impractical involvement that endangered his career as a writer. Radicalism paid very poor in America; it also tended to estrange him from the black masses” (375). Rampersad also suggests that the immediate financial and literary success received by Richard Wright after his release of *Native Son* in 1940 was a point of contention for Hughes. While he praised the novel, Hughes was still shocked by Wright’s “almost unrelieved distaste for blacks, on one hand, and his evident love-hatred of whites, on the other” (Rampersad 383). Hughes continued to work throughout the 1940s, but he also distanced himself from the social

realism of his earlier career and his contemporaries. Although, he would deal extensively with music again in his 1951 release of *Montage of A Dream Deferred*, the next chapter will explore how the social realism of the 1940s deployed music as method of complicating and critiquing questions of class and gender in Marxist thought.

Chapter 2

Richard Wright and Ann Petry: The Intersection Between Music and Politics in 1940s African-American Realism

Despite being retroactively denounced as a period of modernist opulence by many within the movement³⁹ and historicized as effectively halted by the devastating loss of industrial and manufacturing jobs that accompanied the stock market crash⁴⁰, the Harlem Renaissance was in no way divorced from the rise of African-American ‘social realism’ in the 1930s and 40s. As several scholars have noted, the shift from the “modernist burlesque” of the twenties to the “proletarian thirties” (Retman 40) was not an intellectual revelation of the relationship between race, class, gender, and capitalism, but was characterized by a shift in aesthetics and affiliation.⁴¹ As the economy withered and a growing number of Americans began to adopt socialist and Marxist ideals, the Cultural Front emerged as a group of artists and writers committed to capturing working class experiences as laborers, consumers, and political collectivities.⁴² Organized around the principles of a “laborist social democracy, anti-fascism, and anti-racism” (Denning 4) and

³⁹ As Stacy I. Morgan notes in her book *Rethinking Social Realism* (2004), writers such as W.E.B. DuBois, Langston Hughes, Wallace Thurman, and Alain Locke all critiqued the efficacy of the Harlem Renaissance. Morgan’s text argues that this is indicative of a shifting aesthetic rather than a record of the movement’s ineffectiveness, noting that this “castigation...does offer an important indicator of how key figures...conceptualized their own intentionality as artists, writers, and critics” (4).

⁴⁰ Highlighting the vast unemployment and economic degradation that took place by the end of 1930, David Levering Lewis’ book *When Harlem Was in Vogue* equivocates the social and economic intricacies of the Great Depression as indicative of the Harlem Renaissance’s waning influence on African-American literature.

⁴¹ See Sonnet Retman (2011), pgs. 38-41 and Michael Denning (1997), pgs. 38-50 for more information on the transition from the 1920s into the more acutely social realist tendencies of the 1930s and 1940s.

⁴² Michael Denning defines the Cultural Front as it “referred to both the culture industries and apparatuses—a ‘front’ or terrain of cultural struggle—and to the alliance of radical artists and intellectuals who made up the ‘cultural’ part of the Popular Front” (xix).

an invaluable part of the Popular Front's efforts⁴³, the Cultural Front depended on the "notion of direct and immediate experience" (Stott 77) to describe the contradictions of capitalism and the possibilities for class-based solidarity. Although African-American authors and artists included documentary detail into their work, many were committed to complicating these class driven initiatives through an increased focus on issues of race and gender-based oppression⁴⁴. Emerging as two towering figures in the development of American social realism, Richard Wright and Ann Petry were both committed to writing narratives that were materially immediate, visceral, and directly associated to the ideologies of racial capitalism⁴⁵ that have been both long-standing and persistent in their adaptability. Responding to an era that was "rich in the production of popular fantasy and trenchant social criticism" (Dickstein 4), Wright's *12 Million Black Voices* (1941) and Petry's *The Street* (1946) both express a growing concern with the place of culture in the struggle for social, economic, and political freedom. While both of their texts address the multi-

⁴³ As Denning defines it, the Popular Front was "born out of the social upheavals of 1934 and coinciding with the Communist Party's period of greatest influence in US society...became a radical historical bloc uniting industrial unionists, Communists, independent socialists, community activists, and émigré anti-facists around laborist social democracy, anti-facism, and anti-lynching" (4).

⁴⁴ As Michael Denning discusses, this includes but is not limited to the American Labor Party, the American Workers Party, the National Negro Congress, the Federal Theater Project, Hollywood Writer's Mobilization, the Hollywood Anti-Nazi League, the International Workers Order, and the many organizations dedicated to worker's rights and Communist politics across the South (see Robin Kelley; *Hammer and Hoe*, 1990). However, I am also contextualizing Wright and Petry's work in relation to the murals of John Bigger and Charles White, the graphic art of Elizabeth Catlett and Prentiss Taylor, the music and activism of Paul Robeson (see Stacy Morgan, *Rethinking Social Realism*, 2004) and texts such as George Schuyler's *Black No More* (1931), Wallace Thurman's *Infants of the Spring* (1932), Langston Hughes' *The Ways of White Folks* (1934), W.E.B. DuBois' *Black Reconstruction* (1935), C.L.R. James' *Black Jacobins* (1989), and Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* (1928).

⁴⁵ I intend here to apply Cedric Robinson's (1983) definition of racial capitalism as, "the development, organization, and expansion of capitalist society pursued essentially racial directions, so too did social ideology. As a material force, then, it could be expected that racialism would inevitably permeate social structures emergent from capitalism. I have used the term "racial capitalism" to refer to this development and to the subsequent structure as a historical agency"(2).

faceted, layered, and profuse infiltration of capitalism into the everyday lives of African-Americans, it is musical/oral culture and spaces of cultural production that anchor their texts and make apparent the relationship between the material present and the historical narratives of race and capitalism that produce these conditions. Addressing how African-Americans' prolonged engagement with capitalist structures and bourgeois ideologies has either facilitated revolutionary cultural forms or neutered them from the sources which give them meaning and value, these texts demonstrate how the aligned "aesthetic ideologies" (Denning 202) of the interwar period often produced disparate interpretations of culture's relationship to capitalism and its ability to enact social change. Careful to discern between "cultural politics", or artists varying degrees of political affiliation⁴⁶, and the artistic work it produced, Denning defines "aesthetic ideologies" as:

...the conscious and unconscious way of valuing that a cultural formation develops and inculcates, its "aesthetic," its sense of what is good, true, and beautiful. This aesthetic ideology is rarely straightforward and uncomplicated. One usually finds a contradictory juxtaposition of explicitly formulated values and prescriptions, a selected tradition of valuable precursors, a hierarchy of more or less important forms and genres...and the traces of established tastes, acquired in a particular habitus, marked by class, ethnic, and gender distinctions. (Denning 202)

⁴⁶ Critiquing what he identifies as a repeated tendency to view the period through a "core-periphery model, one in which the core was the Communist Party and the periphery was the surrounding circles of 'fellow travelers' with greater or lesser degrees of affiliation" Denning encourages scholars to focus on the specificities of any particular work rather than over-reaching for "the Moscow gold that kept it all running" (xviii).

A predecessor to Cedric Robinson's critiques of racial capitalism, black feminism's discussion of intersectionality⁴⁷, the Black Power movement's materialist philosophies, and hip-hop's focus on space and the expression of nihilism (amongst many other topics)⁴⁸, both texts are interested in how cultural-materialist critiques interact with political and social meta-narratives to create a "sense of what is good, true, and beautiful." Creating direct associations between the past and the present, music is not the only focus of these texts, but it is their lynchpin, their opportunity to offer alternative interpretations of how racism, American narratives of capitalist progress, and lived conditions have modified African-Americans psychological understandings of the self and their relationship to ideologies of religious fealty and American individualism.

Speaking as the collective "we" of the African-American working class, Wright's photo-text documentary narrates 350 years of history, frequently drawing connections between the material conditions of the photographs and the ideological remnants of racial capitalism described in the narrative. The creative extension of ideas presented in his famous essay "Blueprint for Negro Writing" (1937)⁴⁹, *12 Million* presents vernacular, folklore, sermons, and the blues as both a trans-historical record of everyday resistance and a genealogical iteration of capitalism's contradictions. A radical assertion of Marxist historiography and cultural nationalism, the text suggests that African-Americans

⁴⁷ See "Combahee River Collective" (1979); *Home Girls* (1983); *Women, Race, and Class* (1982)

⁴⁸ This is not to say that writers of the Harlem Renaissance and 19th century were not concerned with these issues or contributed to Wright and Petry's aesthetic development, but that these two authors are closely aligned with many radical political and aesthetic formations across the 20th century.

⁴⁹ While Wright never explicitly discussed the relationship between these two texts, reading them side-by-side clearly demonstrates the relationship between his early Marxist theories and this later work of creative non-fiction.

prolonged engagement with Christianity and racial capitalism (as both commodities and workers) resulted in the development of a latent, but revolutionary social consciousness. Arguing that these aesthetic traditions can make clear “the uneasily tied knot of pain and hope whose snarled strands converge from many points of space and time” (*12 Million* 11), Wright promotes a radical black Christianity and view of the “whole culture” as foundational to accessing a social democratic vision of freedom that lies beyond the bounds of capitalism.

If Wright’s text argues for self-determination and the revolutionary capacity of culture, Petry is far less comfortable with culture’s ability to assuage the ravages of capitalism. Told from the individual perspective of Lutie Johnson, a single mother in Harlem, *The Street* (1946) presents space, and in particular spaces of cultural production, as sites where material conditions and ideologies of the American Dream interact to isolate the individual and exacerbate alienation. Attentive to what Mary Pat Brady describes, as a “too rigid binary between the material and the discursive” (6), the text employs vivid and relentless material detail to demonstrate the detrimental relationship between ideologies of the American Dream and systemic forms of racial exploitation and oppression. For large parts of the novel, Lutie believes in the American Dream, in the idea that she “can stake out a piece of life for herself” (*The Street* 187) through hard work and diligence. However, in every job she is confronted by the material contradictions of this ideology. Offered limited opportunities for work because of her race and gender, constantly under the threat of sexual assault, and entrapped by the very money she needs to escape, Lutie desperately clings to a “promise of prosperity and social mobility” (Dickstein xxi) that began with Benjamin Franklin and has persisted well into the 20th century. With a near obsessive

internal dialogue about money and an attempt to escape the “dirty, dark, filthy traps” (*The Street* 73) of Harlem, Lutie optimistically jumps at the opportunity to become a singer and finally escape the street. However, when she realizes that singing is simply another form of entrapment, all of the fantasies and visions she has of constructing a better life for herself and her son come crashing down. This interaction with music leads to her violent and tragic downfall, suggesting that culture, while containing the possibility for profoundly expressing the contradictions of capitalism, it is still complicit with its machinations and powerless to fundamentally alter the system it describes.

By addressing each author’s stylistic techniques and manipulation of genre form, and this chapter seeks to enhance our understanding of the interaction between culture and representations of racial capitalism during the interwar period. While this chapter does take into account Wright and Petry’s political thought, it does not prioritize it as necessary to either draw a comparison between them or provide a historical materialist reading of their texts. What interests me is how Wright and Petry’s aligned aesthetic ideologies narrate music/oral culture to explicate the relationship between the genealogies of racial capitalism and current material environments.

Richard Wright’s Dialectic: A “Blueprint for Negro Writing”, Cultural Nationalism, and Mobilizing Culture in Service of Politics

Revolutionary in tone, emphatic in gesture, and dedicated to narrating the African-American experience through a combination of sweeping historical gestures, documentarian description, and photographic evidence, Richard Wright’s *12 Million Black Voices* (1941) reflects its influences while still presenting a nascent, but radical theory of historical materialism. Pioneered in the late 1930s by Erskine Caldwell and Margaret

Bourke-White's book *You Have Seen Their Faces* (1937), the photo-text documentary or the "documentary book" as William Stott identifies it, often presented tenant farmers and migrant workers as mired in a widespread hopelessness that provoked both sentimentalism and demands for social justice.⁵⁰ Commissioned in 1935 to publicize and gain popular support for New Deal initiatives⁵¹, the Farm Security Administration began a vast photographic archive that was made immediately available for circulation to government agencies, newspapers and the daily newsreels. While these photo-texts often generalized the experience of those it sought to describe, the frequent insertion of photographs made "the viewer almost an eyewitness" (Stott 76) to the material conditions of the Great Depression. Meant to create a sense of "equivalence, proof, veracity, and legality", documentary images promised the reader a sense of the subject's "empirical identity, referentiality, and validity" (Goodwin 273). If viewers held on to the belief that photographs were mechanical and lacking bias, they encountered the text or captioning, which was often egregiously overwrought, for emotional or visceral cues. Identified by William Stott as a method of "vicarious or confessional" writing, the text encouraged the audience to empathize with the writer's impressions of the subjects. If the writer is

⁵⁰ See William Stott, *Documentary Expression and Thirties America* (1973), pgs. 211-238 for a careful consideration of several photo-texts and their stylistic tendencies. His analysis includes James Agee and Walker Evans *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941), H.C. Nixon's *Forty Acres and Steel Mules* (1938), Archibald MacLeish's *Land of the Free* (1938), and Dorothea Lange and Paul Taylor's *An American Exodus* (1939). See also Michael Denning; *The Cultural Front: Laboring and of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (1997), pgs. 118-123.

⁵¹ Notable New Deal policies include the creation of the Securities and Exchange Commissions (SEC), the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), the Federal Emergency Relief Administration, the Social Security Act, and the Works Progress Administration (WPA). See Michael Heale (2002), pgs. 16-44 for more information on these policies.

outraged or sad, the reader must be so as well.⁵² Although influenced by the genre's documentarian aesthetic, Richard Wright's text attempts to transform the FSA photographs into a call for cultural solidarity and revolutionary materialism. Disinterested in language as empathy, *12 Million Black Voices* represents, in the grandiose voice of the African-American working class, the experiences of black people in the United States from the 17th century forward.⁵³ In contrast to the immediacy of the photos, it is Wright's text that troubles the ability of the photograph to objectively and transparently produce knowledge of the racial subject. Insistent upon historicizing the political, social, and cultural actions and reactions that led to the circumstances of the current photographs, *12 Million* creates what Jeff Allred describes as a new form of "historical inquiry":

Black Voices embodies this ethic, promoting a documentary aesthetic that at once estranges its readers from the subject and offers a way back through captioning, imagined as a social and historical mapping of the relationships between disparate social locations and subject positions. (Allred 553)

Taken alone, the photographs offer an incomplete picture of African-American life; it is text that "offers a way back" and creates "a social and historical mapping" of the ideological and material conditions that connect the community across temporal and spatial boundaries. Textual record also gives Wright an opportunity to creatively engage with the encoded, flexible, and ever-evolving record of African-American linguistic and musical invention.

⁵² See William Stott (1973), pgs. 33-36 for more on the idea of "persuasion" and 1930s photo-texts. As he notes, "This method gives the facts indirectly, through an intermediary. A member of the audience isn't put in the place of the firsthand experiencer; this role is taken by someone else, whose reactions to the facts are often as influential as the facts themselves." (33)

⁵³ Joel Woller's article "First-Person Plural: The Voice of the Masses in FSA Documentary" outlines the multiple critiques Richard Wright received after the release of *12 Million Black Voices*.

Particularly interested in the relationship between cultural aesthetics and American capitalism, Wright presented language as a source of potentially powerful political collectivities. As James Goodwin notes in his discussion of the creative relationship between Wright and Rosskum:

While Wright had been eager to collaborate on this photo-text, *12 Million Black Voices* ultimately proves to make an operative, categorical distinction between *pictures* as a descriptive, mechanical, folkloric record and *words* with their vital capacity for double, even multiple, voicing through irony, conceptualization, abstraction, and exhortation. (287, italics his)

Many photographic depictions of the Depression era portray “the people are pinned like social specimens, frozen into postures that allow little movement, no escape” (Dickstein 36). Wright juxtaposes the photographs with the multiple meaning embedded in African-American sermons, blues, vernacular, and music. Dependent on tone, cadence, rhythm, metaphor, double entendre, and signifying (amongst many other practices⁵⁴), these cultural expressions created a shared history of aesthetics, assimilation, and rebellion. Through oral and musical culture, African-Americans created multiple and often contradictory interpretations of language, utterances that made it possible to speak of capitalist contradiction without fear of reprimand from slaveholders, overseers, businesses, or the government.

Encouraging a continued shift from historical subjects to historical agents, Wright’s famous essay “Blueprint for Negro Writing” calls for increased attention to this “cultural

⁵⁴ See James Weldon Johnson’s introduction to *God’s Trombones* (1927), Zora Neale Hurston’s “Characteristics of Negro Expression” (1934), and Stephen Henderson’s *Understanding the New Black Poetry* (1973) for more on the intricacies of sermons, black vernacular, and music.

nationalism”, or expressions that could grant African-Americans “access to a wide social vision and a deep social consciousness” (“Blueprint” 46). Frustrated by the Communist Party’s pattern of writing “an ideology *for* the working classes rather than *of* the working classes” (Robinson 305), Wright adopted Lenin’s theory that the proletariat should be defined not only by their class, but also by the particularities of their struggles with forms of bourgeois oppression.⁵⁵ In Wright’s view, Marxism “had oversimplified the experience of those it sought to lead” (“I Tried to be a Communist”); not all workers experienced capitalism in the same way, nor did they always attempt to mobilize due to class antagonisms. Encompassing the movement from slavery to sharecropping, migration, and eventual equality and freedom, *12 Million* attempts to capture “a whole culture”, or a series of historical events and aesthetics that “helped to clarify [the community’s] consciousness and create emotional attitudes that are conducive to action” (“Blueprint” 46). The integration of photos, historical narratives, a sermon, blues lyrics, and discussions of vernacular are attempts to not only trace the persistent relationship between race and capitalism, but also to illicit a feeling of possession over cultural practice amongst the community. Anticipating Cedric Robinson’s later work on culturally specific forms of everyday resistance⁵⁶, Wright’s text argues for black aesthetics as a method for

⁵⁵ As Lenin notes in his essay “Theses on the National and Colonial Question”, “In conformity with the its fundamental task of combating bourgeois democracy and exposing its falseness and hypocrisy, the Communist Party, as the avowed champion of the proletariat struggle to overthrow the bourgeois yoke, must base its policy, in the national question too...on a precise appraisal of the specific historical situation and, primarily, of economic conditions; second, on a clear distinction between the interests of the oppressed classes, of working and exploited people, and the general concept of national interests as a whole, which implies the interests of the ruling class...”

⁵⁶ As Robinson discusses in his investigation of marronage and black radicalism, “When separation was not possible, open revolts might fester; where rebellion was immediately impractical, the people prepared themselves through obeah, voodoo, Islam, and Black Christianity. Through these they induced charismatic expectations, socializing and hardening themselves and their young with

communicating historical narrative while challenging the genealogy and oppressive bias of its previous iterations.

Divided into four sections, each representing an important point of departure for Wright in the narration of African-American history⁵⁷, the text begins with an analysis of the dialectical relationship⁵⁸ between capitalist enterprise, race, and humanist philosophies of enlightenment. Vital to the later understanding of the sermon as a form of radical resistance, this section discusses how the European mind “flushed with a new and noble concept of life, of its inherent dignity, of its unlimited possibilities, of its natural worth, these men leaped upon the road of progress; and their leap was the windfall of our tragedy” (12).⁵⁹ Taking what scholar David G. Nicholls identifies as a “tabula rasa approach”⁶⁰ to the aftermath of the Middle Passage, Wright disengages from the African past to create a theory of cultural nationalism that specifically addresses the paradox of American liberty, Christian ideology, and racial capitalism:

beliefs, myths, and messianic visions that would allow them, someday, to attempt the impossible. (310)

⁵⁷ He begins with the journey through the Middle Passage and a brief explication of the humanist philosophies that supported slavery, then moves into the dynamics of sharecropping and the impetus for the Great Migration. The third section addresses the urban experiences after migration, while the final section looks towards the future of the race and their movement towards social, political, and economic freedom.

⁵⁸ Derived from Marxist philosophies of history, my use of the dialectics reflects scholar Moyra Haslett’s assertion in her 2000 book, *Marxist Literary and Cultural Theories*: “...while dialectics is generally held to mean the interaction between contradictory or opposite forces, it is also crucially a consideration of process, the constant change, motion, transformation which characterize history and society, and the tracing of internal contradictions that make a coherent whole of this process. (37)

⁵⁹ In this section, Wright also discusses the complexity of African cultures who “ironed, danced, made music, and recited folk poems...spun cotton and wool...mined silver and gold...had our own literature, our own systems of law, religion, medicine, science, and education...centuries before the Romans ruled, we lived as men” (13).

⁶⁰ Although he refutes its purpose, Nicholls describes Wright’s narration as follows: “The newly arrived slave was a cultural tabula rasa whose raw and numbed body will be given a new consciousness with which to understand the images and symbols of life on American shores.”(117)

Captivity under Christendom blasted our lives, disrupted our families, reached down into the personalities of each one of us and destroyed the very images and symbols which had guided our minds and feelings in an effort to live. Our folkways and folk tales, which had once given meaning and sanction to our actions, faded from consciousness. Our gods were dead and answered us no more. (15)

While many scholars have disputed or flat out reputed the idea that African traditions were erased in the traumatic journey through the Middle Passage⁶¹, Wright sought to create a specific minority outlook⁶², a cultural perspective that, because it was “lacking the handicaps of false ambition and property” (“Blueprint” 46), could articulate not only the relationship between race and capitalism, but also offer a revolutionary vision for change.⁶³ For Wright, once the African past “faded from consciousness” and their “gods were dead and answered them no more”, African-Americans’ cultural and religious practices became inextricably bound to the paradoxes of Christian ideology, Enlightenment ideals, and systems of racial capitalism. Promised to all citizens, but demarcated for the few, the promise of “Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity” (17) always hinged on theologically rationalized forms of racism:

⁶¹ See Henry Louis Gates Jr. (1988); Leroi Jones (1963); Paul Gilroy (1993); Saidiya Hartman (1997)

⁶² This approach by Wright also echoes George Lukacs 1923 essay “The Standpoint of the Proletariat”. See *History and Class Consciousness* (1968), pgs. 149-223. It could also be said that Wright views himself as an “organic intellectual” in the vein of Antonio Gramsci. See *Prison Notebooks* (1971), pgs.3-24, 44-52.

⁶³ Developed with some disregard for historical accuracy, Wright’s presumes that the collective “we” of the African-American voice is exclusively proletarian. See Carla Cappetti (1985) for more information of Wright’s relationship with the Chicago School and Sociology and its relationship to the documentarian tone of Wright’s work throughout the late 30’s and early 40’s.

To evade the prevailing Christian injunction that all baptized men are free, and to check our growing record of revolt, they culled from the Bible a thousand quotable verses admonishing us slaves to be true to our masters. Thereupon they felt that they had squared conscience with practice, and they extended Christian salvation to us without the boon of freedom. This dual attitude combined with the love of gold and God⁶⁴, was the beginning of America's paternalistic code towards her black maid, her black industrial worker, her black stevedore, her black dancer, her black waiter, her black sharecropper; it was a code of casual cruelty, of brutal kindness, of genial despotism...that dominates, in small or large measure, all black and white relations throughout the nation until this day. (18)

By ideologically justifying their greed and racism through religion, slave traders, governments, and individuals managed to create a "paternalistic code" that "squared practice with conscious." Other-worldly freedom was granted while basic civil and human rights were ignored. The juxtaposition of sentiments such as "casual cruelty" and "brutal kindness" mimics racial capitalism's rationale and interrogates its alignment with theology as a form of freedom. A political, social, and economic meta-narrative that made possible the designation of African-Americans as slaves or a perpetual proletariat, this ideology is still felt in the material conditions of the "industrial worker" of the city, the "sharecropper" in the south, the "maid" in private homes, and the "dancer" on public stages (all of whom are presented in the photographs). Transforming the photographs from static

⁶⁴ Echoing W.E.B. DuBois's pronouncement in "Of the Wings of Atalanta" that "Atalanta is not the first maiden whom greed of gold has led to defile the temple of Love...and in all our Nation's striving is not the Gospel of Work defiled by the Gospel of Pay?" (60).

representations to an opportunity to “see the *living* past living in the present” (*12 Million 46*), the narrative compresses the experiences of the present into a succinct iteration of the past. This is an early attempt to demonstrate how the versatility of language in the present, can offer to a revolutionary and trans-historical consciousness. In individual exchanges between friends or family, in folklore, spirituals, and the blues, African-Americans’ ability to master, then drastically alter the language and music of the oppressors created cultural expressions that often served as both protective masks and subversive critiques.⁶⁵ As Wright notes, in the face of racist social and economic conditions, the community was able to express a coherent collective identity:

And we charged this meager horde of stolen sounds with all the emotions and longings we had; we proceeded to build our language in inflections of voice, through tonal variety, by hurried speech, in honeyed drawls...by assigning common, simple words new meanings, meaning which enabled us to speak of revolt in the actual presence of the Lords of the Land without their being aware! Our secret language extended our understanding of what slavery meant and gave us freedom to our brothers in captivity; we polished our new words, caressed them, gave them new shape and color, a new order and tempo...until they became *our* words, *our* language. (*12 Million 40*)

In contrast to the belief “that black men and women are *mis-speakers*, bereft of humanity” (Baker 21), Wright’s text focuses on the efficacy of folk culture as a record of the relationship between ideological meta-narratives and current material conditions. Through chiasmus, metaphor, double entendre, and shifts in rhythm, tone, speed, and bodily gesture,

⁶⁵ See also Louis Chude-Sokei (2005); Eric Lott (1993); Kevin Young (2012).

words became a cultural aesthetic that could express the long-standing and ever transforming relationship between race and capitalism.

An extension of folk culture and an invaluable site for community organization and political solidarity, the church occupies a central place in the text. An attempt to reconcile the spiritual and the secular, the mind and the body, the material and the discursive, this section employs oral and musical culture to explicate the relationship between sermons, spirituals and the blues. Placed at the center of the book, Wright briefly introduces the reader to the traditions of preparing for church, then immediately turns to the sermon as capable of communicating a shared historical understanding or “vision”:

The preacher tells of days long ago and of a people whose sufferings were like ours. He preaches of Hebrew children and fiery furnaces, of Daniel, of Moses, of Solomon, and of Christ. What we have not dared feel in the presence of the Lords of the Land, we now feel in church. Our hearts and bodies, reciprocally acting upon each other, swing out into the meaning of the story the preacher is unfolding. Our eyes become absorbed in a vision...”

(12 Million 68)

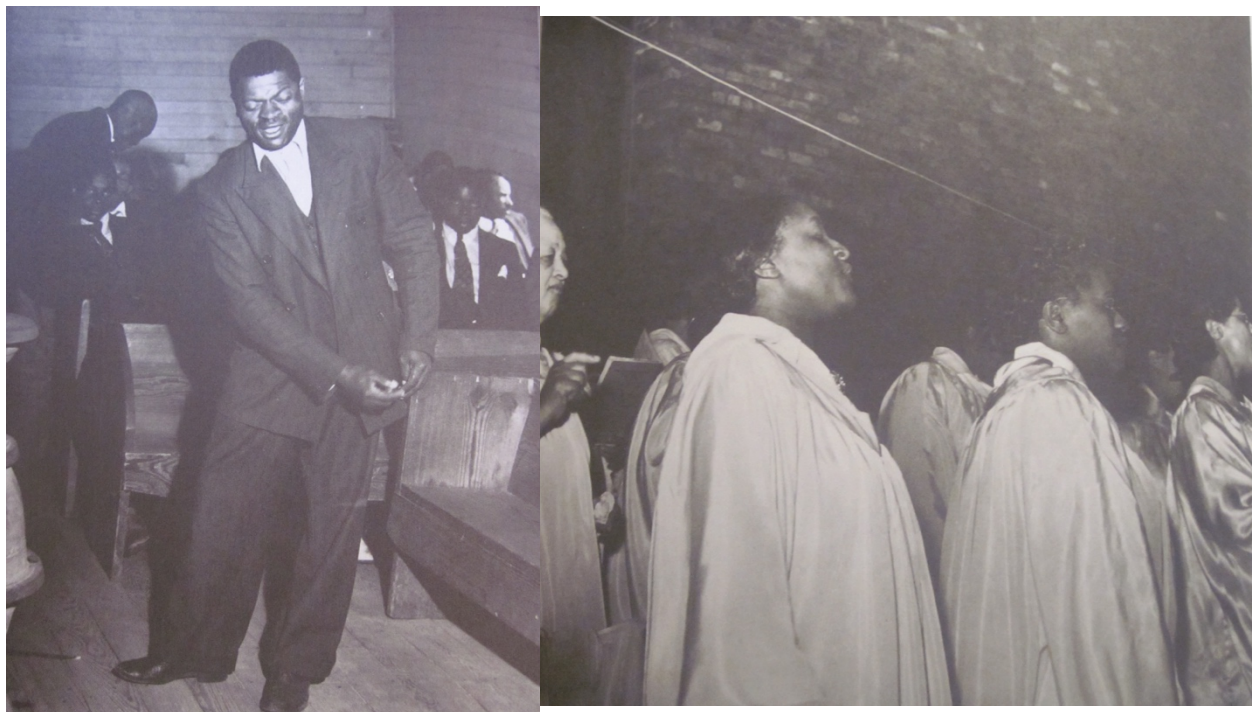
Even as the reader is looking at photographs and scenes of the church, Wright implores them to create a new “vision” through language, to search for new “meaning” in the cadence, tone, and narrative of the preacher. The church is not simply a refuge for the soul, but a site where the body and soul, “reciprocally acting upon each other” can create a vision of black radical Christianity. Just as the soul cannot be separated from the material conditions it encounters, the language of the preacher cannot be dissociated from the

everyday realities it addresses. As Cornel West will later note in his investigation of prophetic Afro-Christian theology:

For prophetic Christianity, the two inseparable notions of freedom are existential freedom and social freedom...Social freedom is the aim of Christian political practice, a praxis that flows from the divine gift of grace; social freedom results from the promotion and actualization of the norms of individuality and democracy. Existential freedom empowers people to fight for social freedom, to realize its political dimension. Existential freedom anticipates history and is ultimately transhistorical, whereas social freedom is thoroughly a manner of this worldly human liberation. (West 18)

As noted earlier, Wright is determined to blur the arbitrary divisions between the body and the soul, between recognizing the necessity for freedom and acting upon that need. A combination of political praxis and a deep, abiding faith in the possibilities for the future, Wright's sermon "marks the emergence of a new culture in the shell of the old" ("Blueprint 48). Mimicking a sermon that James Weldon Johnson described in 1927 as both familiar and "generally preached", Wright relays a narrative that "began with the Creation, rambled through the trials and tribulations of the Hebrew Children, and ended with Judgment Day and a warning and exhortation to sinners" (Johnson 1). Choosing to italicize the sermon and provide no punctuation to slow the momentum of the language, the audience must decide when to pause, when to breathe, what accentuation to make, and what meaning to derive between the sermon and the images. When the preacher describes mankind's fall and that "*God seeing this decrees that Man shall live in Law not Love and must endure Toil and Pain and Death and must dig for his bread in the stony earth*" (71), it is intended that the

audience will both reflect on their individual experiences in the church and how they relate to the material conditions of the group. Relaying images of speaking and listening, singing and praying, exhortation and calm reflection, the photos are energized by the text that accompanies them. Represented in the swaying motion of the preacher and the singing of the choir, the images are meant to pull the reader from sociological abstraction into a re-creation of experience. The reader is no longer experiencing these photos as an empathetic



gesture, but are participating an experience of transcendent vision. They are not intended to be passive recipients of this sermon, but active participants in accessing the present as a powerful reimagination of the past and future. As can be seen in Wright's final lines of the sermon, the description of the Second Coming communicates a latent, although valuable, iteration of capitalist critique. This vision of radical black Christianity reanimates the past to modify how we understand the present and envision the future.

He will come for a second time bringing not peace but a sword to rout the powers of darkness and build a new Jerusalem and God through his prophets says that the final fight the last battle Armageddon will be resumed and will endure until the end of Time and Death... (72).

Enabled by God, but executed by the members singing, speaking, and listening to his word, the sermon outlines the moment in which existential and social freedom are simultaneously realized. Freeing the body and soul from the temporal boundaries of death and traditional genealogies, the final lines implore the congregation to overthrow their circumstances and, like the narrative of Armageddon, create a “new Jerusalem” with a “sword to rout the powers of darkness.” It is only at this moment, when the materiality of the present comes into direct conversation with the past, that the latent iterations of a capitalist critique and the first steps towards action can be taken. As Wright describes:

Here are those vital beginnings of a recognition of life as it is *lived*... And at the moment this process starts, at the moment when a people begin to realize a *meaning* in their suffering, the civilization that engenders that suffering is doomed. (“Blueprint” 48)⁶⁶

The sermon is more than a collection of words, it is a cultural aesthetic that enables African-Americans to see a “*meaning* in their suffering”. Wright does not simply want the congregation to feel release from daily struggles, but to understand that release as reflective of their capacity to change their material realities and genuinely possess

⁶⁶ As Marx notes in *The Communist Manifesto*, “When people speak of the ideas that revolutionize society, they do but express that fact that within the old society the elements of a new one have been created, and that the dissolution of the old ideas keeps even pace with the dissolution of the old ideas of existence” (73-74).

freedom. This form of social and revolutionary consciousness begins in the soul and emanates outward into the body, into the material. This is why Wright emerges from the preacher's narrative into a description of the body, of the reactions of the congregation after this prophetic vision of struggle that leads to a new future:

...the preacher's voice is sweet to us, caressing and lashing, conveying to us a heightening of consciousness that the Lords of Land would rather keep from us, filling us with a sense of hope that is treasonable to the rule of Queen Cotton (*12 Million* 73).

Implying an orgasmic intensity that emerges from the vitality of the sermon, the preacher's voice is "caressing and lashing" the congregation as it "increases in emotional intensity." As they grapple with a freedom existentially felt, but yet to be socially realized, the congregation enters into a climatic moment in which they forget "who we are, what we are, or where we are" (73). Renewing a sense of hope that permeates the body and empowers the mind: "We go home pleasantly tired and sleep easily, for we know that we hold somewhere within our hearts a possibility of inexhaustible happiness..." (73). This temporary assuage holds the possibility for permanence, for an "inexhaustible happiness" that can emerge from African-American aesthetics and their capacity for alternative historical narratives. As Wright would later discuss in a 1961 interview:

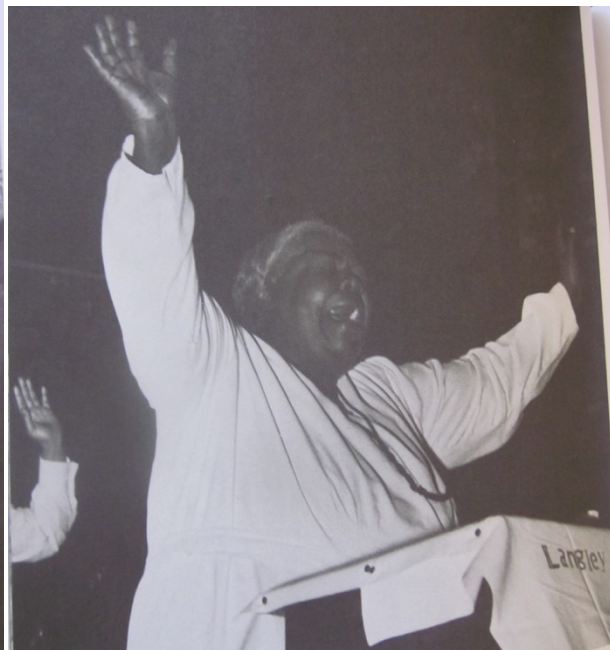
Protestant ministers have put to religious use the sexual power of convulsive songs and have channeled aphrodisiac music into spirituals...In spirituals and in Ray Charles—I repeat—there is the same erotic exultation. This aspect of black music has been denied for way too long. The faith of mystics and of

most blacks has a sexual ingredient which well meaning people are too timid to dare admit, but which must be proclaimed (Tenot 242).

Despite the multiple ways the community, both white and black, tried to create a division between the middle-class respectability of the spirituals and the loose morals of the blues, Wright refuses the compulsion to categorize “the whole culture” he is attempting to narrate. In the same way a congregation member is not ashamed to “float on a tide of passion” during the sermon, nor is the community “ashamed to go of a Saturday night to the crossroad dancehall and slow drag, ball the jack, and Charleston to an old guitar and piano” (*12 Million* 73). It is no coincidence that on the page immediately following the congregation, Wright documents a blues lines that troubles the supposed division between the spiritual and the secular; “*I love you once/ I love you twice/ I love you next to/ Jesus Christ*” (74). Emerging from the different, but equally harsh conditions of migration and the urban cities of the North, the blues “represented freedom in more immediate and accessible terms” (Davis 7). No longer an impossibility to achieve material freedom, blues artists rarely focused on the “other-worldly” aspirations of the previous generations. Instead they indicated a shift from one vision of freedom to another, from a spiritual longing for release to an open and blunt declaration of material freedom. Additionally, they traced a shift in the particularities of racial capitalism. As Wright describes:

On the plantations our songs carried a strain of other-worldly yearning which people called “spiritual”; but now our blues, jazz, swing, and boogie-woogie are our “spirituals” of the city pavements, our longing for freedom and opportunity, an expression of our bewilderment and despair in a world whose meaning eludes us. (*12 Million* 128)

For Wright, these two expressions are not fundamentally separate, but indicate a shift in consciousness that could be harnessed to facilitate revolutionary change. Offering a photographic parallel between the space of the church and the space of the juke joint or cabaret, Edward Rosskum's photographs capture a similar sentiment, a capacity for communal joy that "banishes the fear of loneliness and death" and allows for a "reservoir of human feeling" (*12 Million* 73). Despite being misrepresented and misunderstood by white audiences, the women photographed below express the potential for bodily or material freedom when existential freedom or a shared understanding of the past empowers them.



In contrast to the white audience who may engage with the book, each photo contains an implied or fully rendered African-American audience who could transform cultural solidarity into revolutionary action. Folklore, music, orality, and religion compress the past

and present, offer a vision of the present and future that rest firmly in an understanding of the past. Yet, ultimately this knowledge must lead to action, must necessitate changes that rest beyond the confines of language. As Wright notes in the final, grandiose pronouncement of the text:

...hundreds of thousands of us are moving into the sphere of conscious history. We are with the new tide. We stand at the crossroads. We watch each new procession. The hot wires carry urgent appeals. Print compels us. Voices are speaking. Men are moving! And we shall be with them... (*12 Million* 147)

Just as African-American aesthetics rests at the “crossroads” of the spiritual and the secular, African-American workers must recognize their “whole culture” (“Blueprint” 46) as a record that moves the community from reflections of oppression “into the sphere of conscious history.” Gesturing towards the print culture, photographs, radio transmissions, and political voices of the time, the final lines embrace the aesthetic ideologies of the period while gesturing towards their capacity to incite new forms of historical narrative and revolutionary change. *12 Million Black Voices* believes in the power of materialist aesthetics, but refuses to be contained by Marxist narratives of a homogenous working class. Wright’s text insists on cultural specificity as a strength, as a way to renew the principles of Marxism without overlooking the historical specificities of those it characterizes. The ever-growing cultural apparatuses of the nation serve to make these historical resonances clear, to facilitate a discussion of the relationship between the past, the present, and revolutionary hopes for the future.

Representations of Space and the Alienation of the American Dream in Ann Petry’s

The Street

Rather than situating culture as a revolutionary historical force in the lives of African-Americans, Ann Petry's *The Street* presents music and spaces of cultural production as simply another site infiltrated by the interlocking oppressions⁶⁷ of racial capitalism. Centered around Lutie Johnson, a single mother determined to pull herself out of poverty, and a small cast of characters living in the crowded, industrial centers of the north, the novel applies relentless documentarian detail as a method for breaking down what scholar Mary Pat Brady describes as the "too rigid binary between the material and the discursive" (6). Juxtaposing Lutie's internal dialogue of hard work with the raced and gendered machinations of her external environments, the novel is not only shaped by the tangible qualities of the spaces Lutie encounters, but by the discursive ideologies that enable their existence. As Brady discusses in her work with Chicana fiction:

Literature thrives on the intersections between the shaping powers of language and the productive powers of space...it uses space and spatial processes metaphorically to suggest emotions, insights, concepts, characters. It also shapes the way space is perceived, understood, and ultimately produced...Taking the performativity of space seriously also means understanding that categories such as gender, race, and sexuality are not only discursively constructed but spatially enacted and created as well. (8)

Suggesting that philosophies of the self-made man have fundamentally altered how African-Americans understand their material realities and the possibilities for escaping those realities, the novel presents space as a site where the material and ideological

⁶⁷ Footnote black feminist rendering of this concept and gesture towards Petry's place in constructing that narrative.

paradoxes of capitalism come into direct conflict with one another. Beginning with a visceral analogy between the micro-aggressions of space and the ideologies of racial capitalism, the novel immediately draws attention to the “discursively constructed but spatially enacted” specificities of living on the street. The only time Petry narrates a scene free from an individual character’s thoughts or feelings, the opening paragraphs establish not only the documentarian aesthetic of the novel, but the concern with creating physical spaces that reverberate with the active and activating forces of capitalist ideology. Characterized as hindrance to nearly every citizen living there, Petry describes the street as a place that hinders movement and makes even the simplest of tasks difficult:

There was a cold November wind blowing through 116th Street...it drove most people off the street in the block between Seventh and Eight Avenues except for a few hurried pedestrians who bent double in an effort to offer the least possible exposed surface to its violent assault...Fingering its way along the curb, the wind set the bits of paper to dancing higher in the air, so that a barrage of paper swirled into the faces of the people on the street...It found all the dirt and grime on the sidewalk and lifted it up so the dirt got into their noses, making it difficult to breathe; the dust got into their eyes and blinded them; and the grit stung their skins. It wrapped newspaper around their feet entangling them until people cursed deep in their throats, stamped their feet, kicked at the paper. The wind blew it back again and again until they were forced to stoop and dislodge the paper with their hands. And then the wind grabbed their hats, pried their scarves from around their necks, stuck its fingers inside their coat collars, blew their coats away from their bodies...The

wind lifted Lutie Johnson's hair away from the back of her neck so that she felt suddenly naked and bald... (*The Street* 1-2)

Animated by an unseen, but powerful force the street constantly produces violences that the residents feel ("the grit stung their skins"), but cannot trace back to their origins. A powerful analogy between the micro-aggressions of living on the street and the ideologies of racial capitalism, the wind is described as both a feature of the weather and a personality without humanity. With complete disregard for the inhabitants comfort or well-being, the wind "entangles" people to the point of rage, "blinds" them with paper, dirt, and dust, "discourages" their movement, and often makes it "difficult to breathe." It transforms the street "from passive noun (as object) to active verb (as doing)" (Brady 5), making every "old envelope", "chicken bone," piece of scrap paper, and (not inconsequentially) "newspapers" a hindrance to movement and an obstruction of sight. (Petry 1) Even as the residents "stoop" to prevent these public forums from "entangling" them, they find their personal protections; their hats, scarves, and coats are under an equally vicious attack. Offering no space for reprieve, it "grabbed", "pried", and "stuck its fingers inside their coat collars" until the act collapses the division between public and private and becomes naturalized, or simply put, another day on the street.

Seamlessly transitioning from this general analogy to the experiences of the individual, the wind "lifted Lutie Johnson's hair away from the back of her neck so that she felt suddenly naked and bald" (*The Street* 2). Confronted by the prospect of living in an apartment building where the hallways are dark, the walls are thin, the rent is inflated, and the sign claiming "reasonable...could mean almost anything" (4), Lutie views her time on the street as a temporary impediment to the ultimate success promised by the American

Dream. Although she knows there will be a “rattling, clanging noise in the radiators”, “drunk and loudmouth and quarrelsome” tenants, and walls so “flimsy” that “the good people, the bad people, the children, the dogs, and godawful smells would all be wrapped together”, she goes to the apartment in the hopes of distancing herself from her father, who is a drunk, and her now-estranged husband, who was unable to find work. Despite her initial hesitance, Lutie agrees to tour the apartment and, under the leering eyes of the superintendent, begins to think of her grandmother and “all those tales about things that people sensed before they actually happened. Tales that had been handed down and down and down until, if you tried to trace them back you’d end up God knows were—probably Africa” (*The Street* 16). In contrast the detailed descriptions of the tenants and the features of the building, Lutie is quick to dismiss the “tales” that connect her to her recent and distant ancestors. Isolated from the familial structures and cultural traditions that had previously given her life stability, Lutie must focus on her immediate material realities. It is only when she pauses for a moment to observe the apartment that she begins to subconsciously hum:

She started humming under her breath, not realizing she was doing it. It was an old song that Granny used to sing. ‘Ain’t no restin’ place for a sinner like me. Like me. Like me.’ It had a nice recurrent rhythm. ‘Like me. Like me.’ The humming increased in volume as she stood there thinking about the apartment. (*The Street* 17)

Although she remembers her grandmother’s ability to recall hundreds of these songs and tales, Lutie simply recalls this song as a force of habit. Despite her gesture towards an African past and her recitation of a spiritual, she does not understand how the song

comments on African-Americans movement from place to place, or how the “nice recurrent rhythm” of the music historically echoes the voices of those “like me” who also suffered from oppressive material conditions. The song is simply something to pass time as “she stood there thinking about the apartment.” In fact, immediately after she has this moment of subconscious memory, the “queer, muffled sound” of the Super nearby fills her mind with visions of a potential sexual assault. Staring at her and acting strange since her arrival, the superintendent presents a looming threat to Lutie’s personal safety. So much so that Lutie cannot prevent thinking of what may happen:

‘What was that?’ she said sharply, thinking, My God, suppose I’d dropped [the flashlight], suppose I’d been left standing here in the dark of this little room...Suppose he started walking toward me, nearer and nearer in the dark. And I could only hear his footsteps, couldn’t see him, but could hear him coming closer until I started reaching out in the dark trying to keep him away from me, trying to keep him from touching me... (17)

Prioritizing sight over sound, Lutie panics at the thought of the apartment obstructing her vision and making it impossible to objectively evaluate her situation. In contrast to the promised “proof” and “veracity” of documentary film and the “appealing fantasies to counter social and economic malaise” (Dickstein 8) in commercial cinema, this scene thrives on the loss of sight, on the threats that emerge from Lutie’s inability to truly see the imminent threat she knows exists. The material conditions that Lutie confronts are so threatening and immediate that the *imagined* sounds of the superintendent coming towards her supersede her remembrance of songs and tales from her childhood.

Suggesting, through this exchange between Lutie’s past and present, that African-American

cultural memory is being slowly overwhelmed, or at least muffled, by oppressive material realities, Petry then turns to the narratives of consumerism that have taken their place.

Returning to an aesthetic of vision, Petry introduces the reader to Lutie's memories through the image of a commodity, or a seemingly simple advertisement on the subway. In an era when "the assembly line became a common metaphor for an impoverished, brutal work life, and mass production an analogy for unindividuated persons" (Dinerstien 139), commercial interests still monopolized how many citizens understood American identity and Depression-era politics. Through the continued permutation of advertising agencies and industrial designers, mass culture became the mouthpiece for big business and white heteronormative values. Often "constricting their view of the audience to a mere projection of their own cultured, educated, cosmopolitan self-image" (Marchand 83), advertising agencies ignored constituencies that were either systemically eliminated from or restricted access to the privileges of upper and middle-class white families.⁶⁸ As Petry so poignantly demonstrates, Lutie's engagement with the advertisement reveals a complex intersection between consumerism, race, and capitalism:

For the advertisement she was looking at pictured a girl with incredibly blonde hair. The girl leaned close to a dark-haired, smiling man in a navy uniform. They were standing in front of a kitchen sink—a sink whose porcelain surface gleamed under the train lights. The faucets looked like silver. The linoleum of the floor was a crisp black-and-white pattern that

⁶⁸ As Marchand points out, this was often to the detriment of the companies advertisers were working for. However, since sales were so subjective, advertisers begin to look inward, towards the "secondary audiences" of their colleagues, with whom they could relate, and not the experiences of the constituencies they might be actually advertising to. See *Advertising the American Dream*, pgs. 80-83 for more on "secondary audiences."

pointed up the sparkle of the room. Casement windows. Red geraniums in yellow pots. It was, she thought, a miracle of a kitchen. Completely different from the kitchen of the 116th Street apartment she had moved into two weeks ago. But almost exactly like the one she had worked in in Connecticut. (Petry 28).

Rather than acknowledge economic disparity between the apartment Lutie lives in and the “miracle of a kitchen” she observes, big business democratized goods through money⁶⁹, naturalizing the process of consumption as both a reflection of American ingenuity and a promise for the future. This image reminds the reader that while the ideals of the family and household are promoted to all people alike, racial capitalism is designed to maintain white, heteronormative family systems while denying that same stability for black workers. Upon seeing the “porcelain surface” of the sink and the “casement windows” decorated with “red geraniums”, Lutie recalls her time as a domestic worker for the Chandler’s, a wealthy white family who own a home in suburban Connecticut. With the rise of Fordism and the growing necessity to “subdue the imminent threat of class antagonism that was amplified during the Great Depression” (Decker 99), advertisers returned to an idealized past, but with an increased focus on the universal equality of consumption. By promising communal access to the material trappings of the American Dream, but displacing the onus for acquiring them back onto the individual character of any given person, capitalism continued to exploit citizens based on race and gender without accepting any responsibility for their perpetual place as second-class citizens. Lutie sees the kitchen in the advertisement and although she knows it is “completely different” from her life in the

⁶⁹ See Roland Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream* (1985), pgs. 217-219

small, cramped apartment of the city, she still flashes back to a time when she was convinced that she could have that kitchen as well. A common philosophy amongst advertisers in the interwar period, this “parable of the Democracy of Goods” (Marchand 217) is a major force in Lutie’s eventual downfall. As scholar Roland Marchand describes:

...by implicitly defining ‘democracy’ in terms of equal access to consumer products, and then by depicting the everyday functioning of that ‘democracy’ with regard to one product at a time, these tableaux offered Americans an inviting vision of their society as one of incontestable equality. (Marchand 217-218)

Since citizens could now visualize and purchase the American Dream being promised by consumer culture, the accumulation of money became an end in itself, a way to prove both the efficacy and equality of capitalism. For Lutie, who works as a domestic laborer and later a singer, money becomes the only tangible means of acquiring the material conditions she so desperately desires. Eager to pay her family’s mortgage and frustrated by her husband’s inability to find a job despite the fact that he “hunted for one—desperately, eagerly, anxiously”(30), Lutie takes the job with the Chandlers. Despite the fact that takes her several hours away from her family five days a week⁷⁰ and that Lutie refuses to come home on the weekends in an effort to save money, she views this as the only viable option for supporting her husband and son. Confined to the jobs such as domestic work, laundry, and fostering children for the state, Lutie is defined by what Angela Davis describes as the era’s “tautological definition of black people as servants” (94). While the wage laborer is

⁷⁰ Although Petry only mentions that Lutie and her family live in Jamaica, due to the distance to Lyme (114 miles) and the context of the novel would indicate that her husband and father live in Jamaica, Queens, New York.

considered to be “a human being possessing at least a modicum of independence from her employer and her work” (Davis 97), Lutie position as a black female domestic worker offers her no retreat into the putatively ‘private’ space of her own home or the public sphere of leisure. It is not until she receives a letter from her father informing her that Jim is “taking up with another woman” (Petry 52) that Lutie finally quits and returns to move her and her son, Bub, to the street. Thinking about it later, Lutie cannot help but observe the paradox of the situation; she had been forced to “clean another woman’s house and look after another woman’s child while her own marriage went to pot” (Petry 30).

Yet, even as Lutie is alienated from her own family, she is deeply influenced by Mr. Chandler’s talk of becoming “filthy rich” and doing so quite easily. As Petry describes, “After a year of listening to their talk, [Lutie] absorbed some of their same spirit. The belief that anybody could be rich if he wanted to and worked hard enough and figured it out carefully enough” (*The Street* 43). Convinced that the only difference between the Chandler’s and herself is their ability to work smarter and harder, Lutie begins to carefully plan her future around the acquisition and accumulation of money. As she noted in her time with the Chandlers, money resolves feelings of alienation; it made suicides turn into accidents, alcoholism into a nonissue, unhappy marriages into a comfortable façade, and a home unlike Lutie had ever known into the “children’s house” (37) in the country.

Despite the fact that theories of the “self-made man” and the newly formed invocation of the American Dream proved to be, in particular for minorities and immigrants, a falsehood⁷¹, Lutie can’t suppress her optimism as she walks down the street with her groceries. Comparing herself to Benjamin Franklin, Lutie reflects many Americans

⁷¹ See Jeffrey Decker (1997), pgs. 97-10; Morris Dickstein (2009); Thomas Holt (2000), pgs. 57-86

“ecstatic faith in the nation’s heroic past and a willingness to sacrifice for its future” (Decker 97). As can be seen in her internal dialogue, the belief in American individualism and prosperity has a deep influence on her behavior:

...feeling the hard roundness of the rolls through the paper bag, she immediately thought of Ben Franklin and his loaf of bread. And grinned, thinking You and Ben Franklin...she couldn’t get rid of the feeling of self-confidence and she went on thinking that if Ben Franklin could live on a little bit of money and prosper so could she. (*The Street* 63-64)

At one and the same time, money becomes a method for objectifying Lutie’s reality (the rolls) and imagining an alternative life for herself. Although Benjamin Franklin had once been poor and had nothing to show for it but bread, he, like Lutie, still maintained a belief in his own ability to pull himself out of poverty and into affluence.⁷² Echoed in ideologies of American individualism and the American Dream, Franklin’s staunch beliefs in frugality, morality, self-reliance, and entrepreneurship were an excellent panacea to hedge the anxieties surrounding the economic depression. As Eric Decker points out in his investigation of the modern individual, Franklin’s autobiography, with its meticulous schedules and parables for success, provided a unique insight into the formation of America: “Together, democracy and industrial capitalism demanded the transformation of the individual along the paradoxical lines of autonomy and freedom on the one hand, efficiency and atomization on the other.” (xviii) While Lutie believes in her ability, or the

⁷² In Franklin’s autobiography, upon first arriving to Philadelphia, he buys three rolls with the last of his money, eats one and gives the other two to a mother and her child. It is symbolic for both its representation of frugality and generosity, but also because it reflects Franklin’s ceaseless optimism and faith in himself. (Franklin 42-43)

“freedom” to acquire money, her job as a domestic worker atomizes her family and displaces her alienation onto the places where she lives and works. Unlike the factory worker, who must face the objects of their production as “hostile and alien” (“Economic” 87)⁷³, Lutie produces no tangible goods in the market. Therefore she is not confronted by a singular object, but alienated by the “social power” of money to create fantasies of material affluence.⁷⁴

This “social power”, or the ability of “the private power of private persons” to transform space into “a self-sufficient power opposite” of Lutie (“Economic” 87) is most tangibly conveyed in the figure of Junto, the owner of the apartment, Casino, and bar where the majority of the novel takes place. In naming Junto, and his bar, after Benjamin Franklin’s “club for mutual improvement” (97), Petry subtly investigates the relationship between public space and the people who control the growth and development of racial capitalism. Made up of white businessmen working in diverse industries, Benjamin Franklin’s Junto was created to improve not only the moral character and businesses of its members, but to instill the values of industry and virtue throughout Philadelphia and the newly emerging American colonies.⁷⁵ Although the society was secret and limited to only

⁷³ As Marx observes in the “Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts”, “All these consequences follow from the fact that the worker relates to the product of his labor as an alien object...the more the worker externalizes himself from his work, the powerful becomes the alien, objective world that he creates opposite himself...The externalization of the worker in his product implies not only that his labor becomes an object, an exterior existence but also that exists outside him, independent and alien, and becomes a self-sufficient power opposite him, that the life that he has lent the object affronts him, hostile and alien.” (87)

⁷⁴ As Karl Marx observes in *Capital, Volume 1*, capitalism transforms money into “a radical leveler, it erases all distinctions...money is itself a commodity, an external object capable of becoming the private property of any individual. Thus the social power becomes the private power of private persons” (*Capital* 229-230).

⁷⁵ See also Steven Forde, “Benjamin Franklin’s Autobiography and the Education of America.” *American Political Science Review* 86.2 (1992): 357-368.

twelve members⁷⁶, Franklin's vision of influence was fulfilled in spades; as scholar Patrick Allitt points out:

From the 1720s to the 1770s the Junto and many subsequent groups like it campaigned successfully for the introduction of paper money into Philadelphia, along with the founding of a library, a fire department, a fire insurance scheme, a philosophical society, a city hospital, an academy, an improved plan for street repair, and a militia to protect the Quaker colony ("Lights of Philadelphia").

Through these economic and public works projects Franklin reflected a national identity that promoted the concept of democracy for white males while either ignoring the experiences of or exploiting women, minorities, Native Americans, and slaves. A person and a bar, Junto represents the material paradoxes of African-American existence. It is a promise freely given, but deftly manipulated to deny minorities' access to the social and economic freedoms of the nation. As Petry notes, there is a distinct difference between the Junto as a bar for working class African-Americans and as a white man who owns that bar. Desperate for an escape from her "small dark room" and, like all the others in the bar, unable to "bear to look at what they could see of the future smack in the face while listening to the radio or trying to read the evening newspaper" (145), Lutie goes to the Junto to escape the pressing problems of her lived environments (which Junto also owns). After arriving, Lutie orders a beer and responds to the jukebox playing 'Swing It, Sister'; "She

⁷⁶ As Franklin notes in his autobiography, "We had from the beginning made it a rule to keep our institution a secret, which was pretty well observ'd; the intention was to avoid applications of improper persons for admittance, some of whom, perhaps, we might find it difficult to refuse" (159).

hummed as she listened to it, not really aware that she was humming or why, knowing only that she felt free here where there was so much space" (*The Street* 146). Inspired by this fleeting, but pleasant feeling of freedom from the cramped spaces of her apartment, Lutie purchases another beer and then immediately admonishes herself for ruining her carefully planned and barely viable budget. This conflict between the internal desire for freedom and the external pressure of material forces comes into even clearer view when Lutie, once again unaware of her behavior, continues to sing after a song has finished on the jukebox:

The men and women crowded at the bar stopped drinking to look at her. Her voice had a thread of sadness running through it that made the song important, that made it tell a story that wasn't in the words—a story of despair, of loneliness, of frustration. It was a story all of them knew by heart and had always known because they had learned it soon after they were born and would go on adding to it until the day they died. (*The Street* 148)

A temporary stay from the relentless materiality of the novel, this scene acknowledges the power of music to capture and express African-American stories "of despair, of loneliness, of frustration" that are often illegible to white audiences. In contrast to the information transmitted through newspapers, radio, and movies, it is what "wasn't in the words" that compels the people in the bar to pause and take note of Lutie's voice. Petry gestures towards her voice as a form of transcendence that connects the experiences of the individual to the group, but also suggests that these narratives have been naturalized as widespread and inevitable parts of the African-American experience. Singing a song "they had learned...soon after they were born and would go on adding to until the day they died", the music does not incite revolutionary change, but points towards the persistent

adaptability of discourses that isolate and exploit African-American communities based on race and, oftentimes, gender. This is proven when, just as Lutie finishes her song, Boots Smith, Junto's right hand man appears, buys her drinks, and asks if she ever sang for a living. Although she is aware that "Old Man Junto was studying her in the mirror", Lutie's ignores the sexual exploitation that is a constant pressure in her everyday life to consider the possibility of leaving the street by becoming a singer.⁷⁷ Intent on protecting herself from Junto, but still desperate to fulfill her dream of middle-class success, Lutie focuses on the potential of singing with Boots' band at the casino and the income it could provide for her and Bub. Appearing as an owner, but also a partially disembodied representation of those who control the money and therefore the construction of public and private spaces, Junto, and the power he maintains, blends into the surroundings of the bar. As Boots internally articulates:

For Junto's squat-bodied figure was all gray—gray suit, gray hair gray skin, so that he melted into the room. He could sit forever at that table and nobody would look at him twice. All those people guzzling drinks at the bar never glanced in his direction. The ones standing outside on the street and walking back and forth were deaf, dumb, and blind to Junto's existence. Yet he had them coming and going. If they wanted to sleep, they paid him; if they wanted to drink, they paid him; if they wanted to dance, they paid him, and never even knew it. (*The Street* 275)

⁷⁷ As Larry R. Andrews (1995) notes, "As an attractive black woman on her own, Lutie is subjected to the lustful looks of white men, the hostile stares of white women, the sexual propositions of Junto and Mrs. Hedges, and the attempted rapes by Boots and the Super Jones" (200).

An invisible influence on the everyday activities of the people both when they are in the bar and outside of it, Junto symbolizes those who control the concept of value, and the objectified form of value, money. Hidden in plain sight, Junto, like Benjamin Franklin's private group, is only fully realized in the material realities of those in his casinos, bars, and apartments buildings. In the private spaces intended for rest and the public sites created for leisure, the influence of money is so pervasive that the people living on the street "were deaf, dumb, and blind" to the fact that it is all funneled through one man's hands. Even Lutie, who recognizes his power, cannot avoid paying him at every turn. As David Harvey observes in his text *Consciousness and the Urban Experience*, despite the fact that money "arises out of concrete social practices of commodity exchange", the transience of its meaning and influence make it difficult to describe:

Money is simultaneously everything and nothing, everywhere but nowhere in particular, a means that poses as an end, the profoundest and most complete of all centralizing forces in a society where it facilitates the greatest dispersion, a representation that appears quite divorced from whatever it is supposed to represent. It is a *real or concrete abstraction* that exists external to us and exercises real power over us. (Harvey 3)

Like the figure of Junto, with his "gray suit, gray hair, gray skin" (*The Street* 275), money influences every decision that Lutie makes from day to day. Not only is she constantly referencing how much it costs for goods or how much money she will have left over, it also serves to create abstract fantasies of spaces that exist beyond the daily pressures exerted by capitalist forces. While much of the novel is concerned about the intersection between money as a physical representation of value and an abstraction of reality, it is the

“succulent, tantalizing bait” (*The Street* 151) of culture that reveals the potentially tragic consequences of what Harvey identifies as a “concrete abstraction.”

By transforming Lutie’s voice and body into a commodity through singing, Petry brings the “concrete” material conditions of the present into direct conversation with the historical “abstractions” of American prosperity. Filled with anticipation and excitement about the potential money she can make singing, Lutie attends her first recital at the casino determined to win the job as a singer in Boots’ band. Unlike her white counterparts, who associated culture with leisure⁷⁸, Lutie escapes the space of the street only to be confronted by the presumptive eyes of the band members and the audience in the casino. Immediately aware of the band members’ whispers and glares, Lutie observes that “It was quite obvious what they were saying to themselves and to each other, Yeah, Boots has got himself a new chick and this singing business is the old come-on” (*The Street* 221). Objectified by Boots and the band and commodified by Junto, Lutie is confronted by an alienation that forces her inward, or back into her fervent belief that singing can free her and Bub from the street:

Though she was sang the words of the song, it was of something entirely different that she was thinking and putting into the music: she was leaving the street with its dark hallways, its mean, shabby rooms; she was taking Bub away with her to a place where there are no Mrs. Hedges, no resigned and disillusioned little girls, no half-human creatures like the Super. She and Bub were getting away and they would never come back. (*The Street* 222)

⁷⁸ See Robin D.G. Kelley (1997), pgs. 44-46 and Susan Currell (2010), pgs. 1-11, 75-100 for more on turn of the century culture and the perceptions of leisure as a space that could help people escape from the everyday pressures of capitalism.

Cultural expression, rather than enabling revolutionary action, becomes a fantasized means of escape for Lutie, a way to free herself free from the potential prostitution offered by Mrs. Hedges and the threat of rape associated with the Super. Similar to the scene in the bar, Petry places an increased importance on Lutie's ability to sing "the words of the song", but visualize herself doing "something entirely different." Although the music provides a temporary catharsis from her everyday pressures, it is ultimately motivated by an escape from her material conditions, by a desire to "leave the street with its dark hallways." Whether Lutie is singing a song of frustration, loneliness, loss, or even outright protest, it does not guarantee any social change or shift in the environments she must face upon leaving the casino and returning to her home. In fact, her song only further reveals what Robin D.G. Kelley will later identify as "the amazing resilience and elasticity" of the market.⁷⁹ Despite historical, printed, drawn, photographed, visible proof of inequality, Petry presents Lutie's song and its potential to lift her out of poverty as doing very little to address systemic forms of oppression. As Petry would later point out in a brief 1988 autobiography, "The sad, terrible truth about *The Street* is that now forty-one years later I could write that same book about Harlem or any other ghetto. Because life hasn't changed that much for black people." (*Contemporary Authors* 265). Similar to Kelley, Petry stills believes in the ability of culture to profoundly express the contradictions of capitalism, she

⁷⁹ As Kelley (1997) points out in his discussion of hip-hop culture and the revolutionary capacity of music, "I am in no way suggesting that this kind of self-commodification of play is emancipatory, revolutionary or even resistive. Rather, it compromises a range of strategies within capitalism—some quite entrepreneurial, in fact—intended to enable working-class urban youth to avoid dead-end, low-wage labor while devoting their energies to creative and pleasurable pursuits. These strategies do not undermine capitalism; profits generated by the most successful ventures simply buttress capital and illustrate, once again, its amazing resilience and elasticity, even when the commodities themselves offer ideological challenges to its basic premise" (45).

simply questions its' potential to alter the system it encounters. As Petry expresses time and time again, Lutie believes in the possibilities for freedom, but can only realize it through the discursive and material ideologies of capitalism. When she daydreams about leaving the street, all she can picture is:

Bub growing up in some airy, sunny house and herself free from worry about money. She had been able to picture him coming home from school to snacks of cookies and milk and bringing other kids with him; and then playing somewhere near-by, and all she had to do was look out of the window and see him because she was home everyday when he arrived. (*The Street* 311)

Built up by her time with the Chandler's and carefully nurtured by Boots' promise of a singing career, her dream is a picture perfect reflection of middle-class success. Similar to an image straight out of an advertisement, Lutie imagines a scenario in which she can stay at home and give her son the privileges of a patriarchal white family.⁸⁰ This image of stability, space, and freedom offers Lutie hope; when she returns to the casino the next night to perform again, she enters into the space with a renewed sense of self, a confidence that she has finally found her way into the right work, the work that will allow her to realize her image of the American Dream. However, when she broaches the subject of a salary at intermission, she comes to find that Boots and the owner of casino, Junto, never

⁸⁰ Despite Lutie's deep desire to recreate the image of white female privilege she observed when working for the Chandler's, her role as a black female is often dissociated from these images. Tracing this pattern back to slavery, Angela Davis observes that "As the ideology of femininity—a by-product of industrialization—was popularized and disseminated through the new ladies' magazines and romantic novels, white women came to be seen as inhabitants of a sphere totally severed from the realm of productive work... 'Woman' became synonymous with 'housewife' and both 'mother' and 'housewife' bore a fatal mark of inferiority. But among Black female slaves, this vocabulary was nowhere to be found. The economic arrangements of slavery contradicted the hierarchical sexual roles incorporated in the new ideology" (12).

had any intentions of paying her without her affections off the stage also being part of the package. Exercising the social power linked to his accumulation of wealth, Junto makes money inaccessible to Lutie without a mediator. In an earlier discussion, Junto reminds Boots not to pursue Lutie and explicitly tells him “Don’t pay her for singing with the band. Give her presents from time to time...This will make it easier for you to arrange for me to see her.” (*The Street* 274) An ever present, but rarely visible presence, Junto always expects something in return for his investment, and in this case, it is not only Lutie’s voice, but her body. She cannot independently sustain herself through her talents, but must give up much more in return. Once Lutie realizes she is being treated as a commodity to bought and sold by Boots and Junto alike, her dreams of middle-class success are no longer sustainable. The imagined reality she carefully crafted through ideologies of the American Dream and made tangible through the commodity form of money had become tertiary to the probability of realizing that fantasy, of actually being able to escape the conditions she encounters. Even more disturbing is the way Lutie reacts to her now emotionally and psychologically broken perception of the world. Rather than blaming Boots or Junto directly, she displaces the fault for this back onto herself and her failure to successfully realize the pitfalls of American individualism:

The trouble was her. She had built up a fantastic structure made from soft, nebulous, cloudy stuff of dreams. There hadn’t been a solid, practical brick in it, not even a foundation. So of course it had collapsed. It never existed anywhere but her own mind. She might as well face the fact that she would have to go on living in that same street...They would have to live so close to a narrow margin that it wouldn’t really be like living; never going anywhere,

never buying the smallest item that wasn't absolutely essential, even examining essential ones and eliminating them wherever possible. (308-309)

While Lutie views her disappointment as a product of her own making, as a reality constructed in her mind and nothing more, her return to the street demonstrates the efficacy of capitalism in creating and sustaining the exploitation of African-Americans. By recycling Benjamin Franklin's narrative of perceived equality through cultural industries such as advertising, film, radio, and music, Junto and others like him create "a fantastic structure" that sustains their further exploitation of the working class and minorities. By keeping Lutie "so close to a narrow margin" that she can survive, but barely do so, then surrounding her with images of a better life, capitalism sustains hope while avoiding systemic change.⁸¹

Frustrated and angered by her inability to move beyond the streets, Lutie returns to her apartment thinking "This was worse than being back where she started, because she hadn't been able to prevent the growth of a bright optimism that had pictured a shining future" (305). The reality she had imagined and carefully crafted through the optimism of the American Dream now gone, Lutie has nothing to mediate the relationship between her material conditions and her sense of alienation. Following her conversation with Boots, and Bub's arrest, which is manipulated by the Super after his failed attempt to rape her, Lutie is confronted by the need for money, but this time without the illusion of sustaining any kind of permanent freedom. Since Boots and Junto are the only people Lutie knows who can

⁸¹ As scholar Thomas Holt's (2000) reveals in discussion of Fordist economies, "the worker was a consumer as well as a producer; and in order for the system as a whole to be viable, workers must have wages adequate to buy the products they produced. Mass production required mass consumption" (63).

afford a lawyer, she turns to them only to find herself once again an object of gendered violence. Encouraging Lutie to entertain a conversation with Junto, Boots reminds her that the sacrifice of her body “pays off better than anything I know” (421). However, when she looks at Junto sitting on the sofa, all she can think is “I would like to kill him. Not just because he happens to be named Junto, but because I can’t even think straight about him or anybody else anymore. It is as though he were a piece of that dirty street itself, tangible, close at hand, within reach” (422). Petry’s renewed focus on the name of Junto, on the reference to Ben Franklin’s secret club of businessmen, and her constant reference to Junto as somehow hidden until this penultimate scene in the novel makes the recent and distant past immediately present in the space of Lutie’s mind and Boots apartment. Flashing back to her time working at the casino, Lutie remembers how she was often

...straining to hear a thin thread of music that kept getting lost in the babble of voices, the clink of glasses...so that sometimes she wasn’t certain the music was real. Sometimes it was there and then again it was drowned out by other sounds” (421).

Although she wants to believe that the music she is singing and hearing is a means towards a tangible reality, the sounds of consumerism and privileged forms of leisure override her ability to believe the music “was real.” It is as though the infiltration of capitalism into music has “drowned out” Lutie’s ability to truly hear or understand the cultural expressions she performs. Overwhelmed by the loss of her ideological belief and frustrated by her inability to realize that the music would always be superseded by her struggles with material environments, Lutie insists that Junto, and her hope for herself and her son, leave.

Disappointed in her refusal of Junto and determined to exact some kind of revenge for his loss of face, Boots decides to “Let [Junto] get his afterward. I’ll have mine first” (428). Under yet another threat of sexual violence from Boots, Lutie’s finally breaks and lashes out against her material realities. “Unable to see straight” from the lack of money, the smells of garbage, the sounds of neighbors, and the contradictory images of success promoted by films, radio, and advertisers, Lutie fights back against both Boots; after slapping him and getting hit back, she picks up a candlestick from the nearby mantle and begins beating him until he is unrecognizable. An objectified representation of everything she has endured up to this point, Boots becomes “a handy, anonymous figure—a figure which her angry resentment transformed into everything she had hated, everything she had fought against, everything that had served to frustrate her” (429). Having now realized that her material realities cannot be altered by any of the people living on the street, Lutie “was striking at the white world which thrust black people into a walled enclosure from which there was no escape...she was destroying them” (430). Unfortunately, this violent outburst only reminds Lutie that her violence will be met with nothing but total isolation in return. Her husband, Bub, the Chandlers, the street, and the apartment are all gone, with the only perceptible future being more streets in another place, and more work with only slightly different results. This scene, as scholar Marjorie Pryse points out, not only reveals the psychological complexity of Lutie’s character, but also attests to the strength of Petry’s narrative voice:

For even though we know much more than Lutie does—the effect here is to place the everyday reader, whether white or black, in the position of white society looking in on the world of the street—and even though we are not

surprised when Lutie fails to raise herself and her son, we are still surprised, even shocked, at the extent of her fall by the novel's end. (117)

The silent sadness of the final scenes, in which Lutie abandons her son and leaves for Chicago, emerges from the reader's realization that very few people, if any, can emerge from the horrors of racial capitalism fully intact. Petry's ability to juxtapose the ideological trapping of capitalism through so many spaces throughout the novel leaves the reader feeling emotionally stunned and exhausted by its conclusion. Reflective of documentary's tendency to elevate emotion, the silence becomes palpable; the reader "knows another's life because one feels it; one is informed—one sees—through one's feelings" (Stott 9).⁸² Yet, just as Petry elicits emotion through her culture product, she immediately questions its ability to create something beyond the visceral and the emotive. Closing the novel with a memory from Lutie's childhood, Petry gestures towards the role of the writer or cultural producer in being able to actually change the conditions they express⁸³:

Once again she could hear the flat, exasperated voice of the teacher as she looked at the circles Lutie had produced. 'Really,' she said, 'I don't know why

⁸² Talk a little about "primacy of feeling", pgs. 8-9

⁸³ Writing in response to the popularity of *The Street* in her 1950 essay "The Novel as Social Criticism", Petry was appalled at the "fashions in literary criticism" (32) that labeled her novel, and many others of the period, as propaganda, problem novels, or sociological novels. Outlining her feeling that "like all other forms of art, will always reflect the political, economic, and social structure of the period in which it was created" (33), Petry seeks to create a genealogy of work that extends far beyond her own time period. Mentioning the Bible, Shakespeare, Charles Dickens, George Eliot, Leo Tolstoy, John Steinbeck, and Richard Wright, she seeks to position her work as an enduring legacy of craftsmanship and carefully constructed narrative. As she takes care to explain, "The moment a novelist begins to show how society affected the lives of his characters, how they were formed and shaped by the sprawling inchoate world in which they live, he is writing a novel of social criticism whether he call it that or not" (*Writer's Book* 33). Despite her desire not to be affiliated with Communism, or any other political groups, Petry felt that literature has always been "formed and shaped" by the political, social, and economic forces that characters must negotiate in their journey to make sense of an "inchoate world".

they have us bother to teach your people to write.’ Her finger moved over the glass, around and around. The circles showed up plainly on the dusty surface. The woman’s statement was correct, she thought. What possible good has it done to teach people like me to write? (*The Street* 435-436)

Despite the fact that the creation, popularity, and impact of the novel itself undercuts this notion, Petry’s metatextual reference forces her reader to negotiate with the idea that Lutie’s conditions are not changed simply because her story is told. The aesthetic value of the novel is not diminished by Lutie’s reflection, but strengthened by her ability to both create and critique the social realist and documentary impulse of the period. Even as the American cultural, political, and social apparatus employed documentary, photograph, and film to capture the exploitation of the working class in ways yet unexplored, Petry doubts the efficacy of art in creating lasting and systemic social change.

Conclusion

Although Ann Petry’s short story “Solo on the Drums” was only released a year after the success of *The Street*, Petry was already tiring of those critics who identified her work as protest art or social criticism. After spending the first half of the 1940s living in New York and working as an editor and reporter for the radical Left newspaper the *People’s Voice*, Petry quietly withdrew herself from the public spotlight during the second half of the decade. She moved back to her hometown of Old Saybrook, Connecticut, and while her work continued to critique the popular representations of African-Americans in postwar culture, she was also vehemently opposed to critics “who almost reflexively emphasized the work’s political engagements when offering their assessments of value (Brown 9), or others, who felt black writers either had an obligation to solve the problem of race, or at least make it

the main focus of their work.⁸⁴ As she declares in her little discussed 1950 essay “The Novel as Social Criticism”, “The moment a novelist begins to show how society affected the lives of his characters, how they were formed and shaped by the sprawling inchoate world in which they live, he is writing a novel of social criticism whether he call it that or not” (*Writer’s Book* 33). Simply because she felt her characters were “shaped and formed” by the cultural, political, social, and economic factors of their lives, she did not want her writing discursively confined by the literary fashions of the time. Rather, she views much great writing as the ability to profoundly reflect the spirit of the age in which those authors lived and the material conditions they endured. This list includes the Bible, Shakespeare, Charles Dickens, Leo Tolstoy, John Steinbeck, Georg Eliot, and Richard Wright. Additionally, the rise of McCarthyism and the Red Scare was beginning to become a threat to any author affiliated with the Left.

Although Richard Wright had been a much more vehement support of Communist principles and the American political left early in his career, the racial tensions of post-World War II America drove him to Paris where several African-American authors, including James Baldwin, George Padmore, and Chester Himes, were also living and working. As scholars Richard Macksey and Frank E. Moorer discuss, Wright moved away because “he would have been too painfully close to the problem of race as it weighed on him and the ones he loved; and it arguably would have consumed most if not all of his creative energies” (12). Wright’s work during the 1950s, which culminated in his release of *White Man, Listen!* in 1957, also indicates a shift from a national focus on race to an

⁸⁴ See also Lawrence P. Jackson’s *The Indignant Generation* (2011), pgs. 219-250 and the collection *Revising the Blueprint: Ann Petry and the Literary Left*, ed. Alex Lubin (2007) for more on the literary culture of the late 1940s and through the Cold War.

international rendering of those struggles shared by people of color around the globe. As he notes, the history of African-Americans in America is “the history of Western Man writ small...The Negro is America’s metaphor” (72). While he still understood Marxism as a valuable methodology for understanding the experiences of people of color globally, his insistence on the development of a revolutionary black consciousness through the creation of literature and art was highly influential in the development of Black Arts Movement philosophies. As Cedric Robinson points out, and as will be discussed more in the conclusion to the following section, writers such as W.E.B. DuBois, C.L.R. James, and Richard Wright spent their whole career searching for “a synthesis of Marxist and Black Nationalist thought...in them, one can discover an independent and richly suggestive critique of the modern world—a critique whose voice is the most authentic sounding of the brutal depths of Western civilization and its history. There lies, in those works, the beginning of Black Revolutionary theory” (305).

Chapter 3

Performance, Memory, and the Affective Transmission of History in Ann Petry's "Solo on the Drums"

As I have shown in the work of Langston Hughes, Richard Wright, and Ann Petry, the inclusion of music, sites of musical performance, and oral culture act as scenes for reclaiming or rupturing historical narrative through temporal compression. Unlike the previous works discussed, Ann Petry's short story "Solo on the Drums" (1947) is constructed as a prose performance that attempts to replicate the variations in tempo, rhythm, and mood that characterize live jazz performance. Short, visceral, non-linear, and episodic, this technique creates a correlative between sound and memory that focuses on the internal dialogue of Kid Jones as he attempts to voice, through sound, his relationship to the recent and distant past. As he remembers the loss of his wife to the piano player that morning, Petry's narrative style mimics performance, but does not allow the reader to dissociate Kid Jones from his interactions with the band or those people his narrative recalls and reimagines.

Reliant the ability to tell a story through sound⁸⁵, this jazz narrative reveals the artist's desire to make invisible emotions visible, to communicate a story that does not ignore one's personal history, but reanimates it to create a new understanding of the past and, consequently, one's self. Kid Jones' identity is inextricably bound to his exchanges with

⁸⁵ As scholar Walton Muyumba (2009); "Jazz musicians create and extend musical 'conversations' among themselves while in performance, largely by building improvised solos that 'tell stories.' The ability to 'say something' through one's play relies on a tight network of understanding jazz history and musicological theories, rigorously shaped personal aesthetics, and a willingness to interrogate personal identity through performance" (18). Ralph Ellison (1953) and Kevin Young (2012) also discuss the necessity of jazz musicians being able to 'speak' or 'story' through their performance.

the band and to his memories of others, but is not exclusive to one or the other. Unable to communicate sound through style alone, Petry also recreates the aesthetics of jazz performance through affect, or what scholars Gregory Seigworth and Melissa Gregg describe as a state that:

...arises in the midst of *in-between-ness*: in the capacities to act and be acted upon...affect is found in those intensities that pass body to body (human, nonhuman, part-body, and otherwise), in those resonances that circulate about, between, and sometimes stick to bodies and worlds, *and* in the very passages or variations between these intensities and resonances themselves (14).

Focused on the affects of the music, or the ways the body can “act and be acted upon” in scenes of public performance, the narrative juxtaposes Kid Jones internal dialogue with his interactions the audience and the other band members. Challenging presumptions that jazz is solely an expression of “rebellion, sensuality, and sexual liberation” (Dinerstein 13), Petry works in the “passages” of experience and “resonances that circulate about” as musicians grapple with the emotional intensities of their past and present. Described by Ralph Ellison as the “the most eloquent expression of idea-emotions through the technical mastery of their instrument” (189), jazz is dependent on the creativity of the individual and the interchanges between the band. The player must practice their instrument until it becomes an extension of themselves, until their “ideas” become “emotions” and their emotions become expressions of their “self-determined identity” (Ellison 209).

For writers such as Petry and Ellison, who clearly understood the intricacies of the music, these “idea-emotions” could not be characterized as simply a bi-product of mass

culture or a primitivist cure for the anxieties of industrialization.⁸⁶ As Amiri Baraka discusses in his famous essay “Jazz and the White Critic”, jazz expression cannot be condensed “to a strict sociological approach...the notes *mean something*; and the something is, regardless of its stylistic considerations, part of the black psyche as it dictates various forms of Negro culture” (139). In the occasional, but important shifts between the internal machinations of the player and the reactions and perspective of the audience, Petry offers a glimpse into “the black psyche” as it contends with not only sociological theories, but a commodity culture that obscures the origins and meanings of black cultural expression. Despite the fact that Kid Jones’ music always emerges from a combination of cultural tradition, individual experiences, memories of the recent and distant past, and interactions with the band, Petry’s narrative is careful to denote important ways his persona is shaped by the wider public audience and their relationship to consumer culture. As a commodity that appears on stage and emerges from a genre widely circulated and constantly appropriated, Kid Jones’ music must negotiate the tension between what Soyica Diggs Colbert identifies as “hypervisibility” and “black historiography”:

...hypervisibility becomes a constitutive element of blackness that overdetermines black people’s physical bodies and undermines their psychological, intellectual, and emotional lives. The stereotype that black people in the US intrinsically excel at singing and dancing, for example, stems from a long history of displaying not only black people but also people of color in the America’s more generally. (7).

⁸⁶ See Mark Laver; “Rebels and Volkswagens: Charles Mingus and the Commodification of Dissent” (2014) for more information on the relationships between jazz, commerce, and culture in during the mid-century.

Kid Jones visibility, his name on the marquee outside the theater, the color of his skin, and his performance under the lights of a stage, constitutes an environment where white audiences “uninhibited looking participates in the production of blackness” (Diggs 7). In this case, sound gets conflated with racist visual signifiers; white audiences experience his lust, but cannot equivocate it with the feeling “of all those girls that blended into that one girl that was his wife.” They hear his hatred, but cannot see that it is an attempt to fulfill a sense of loss, of irrecoverable joy. This tension between virtuoso performance, or the players’ ability to tell his story, and the obfuscations of the raced marketplace allows for a commentary on the increasing dissonance between the performer and the apparatuses of commodity culture. Although Kid Jones performance emerges from “the subtle and rhythmical shaping of an idea” (Ellison 189), the audience still imagines him as a transhistorical symbol of blackness, or a tragicomic figure they have created over the last two hundred years and now appears before them as “an alienated artist living in the sordid world of jazz and urban nightlife” (Lopes 1470). Even in the final scenes, when Kid Jones acknowledges that “he had topped all other performances”, he still cannot shake the feeling that this performance, like all his others, were simply acts of “selling himself a little piece at a time” (169). As Stuart Hall notes in his acclaimed essay “What is this ‘black’ in black popular culture?”:

...popular culture, commodified and stereotyped as it often is, is not at all, what we sometimes think of it, the arena where we find who we really are, the truth of our experience. It is an arena that is *profoundly* mythic. It is a theater of popular desires, a theater of popular fantasies. It is where we discover and play with identifications of ourselves, where we are imagined,

where we are represented, not only to the audiences out there who do not get the message, but to ourselves for the first time. (113)

Kid Jones entrance into public space, like that of the many African-American musicians and performers before him, is pregnant with representative power, both for himself and the audience that views and interprets his work. “Solo on the Drums” constructs the stage as a site of symbolic and temporal instability, where narratives that conflate the visual and affective with the aural and political are destabilized through the performer. By analyzing the story chronologically, or following the ebbs and flows of Kid Jones narrative as it emerges, this chapter hopes to further explore the complexities of temporal compressions in the intersections between African-American literature and music. I will also be commenting on how they stylistic choice to write this short story as a prose performance shifts how the audience engages with time throughout the piece.

Performance, Affect, and Memory in Virtuoso Jazz Performance

A constant negotiation between public spheres and private thoughts, “Solo on the Drums” opens upon Kid Jones arrival to the “week’s engagement at the Randlert Theater at Broadway and Forty-second street” (“Solo” 165). Following the drummer’s thoughts from the instant he sees his name on the marquee until he enters the dressing room and steps on stage with the band, these early scenes exemplify the tension between how Kid Jones feels and how he appears. As he approaches the theater Kid Jones remembers how “there had been a time when he would have been excited by it...his name—up there in lights that danced and winked in the brassy sunlight” (165). However, with the loss of his wife to the piano player that morning Kid Jones cannot help but feel that he is not the same man

represented in on the marquee. This misrecognition by the audience, or their inability to dissociate him from his persona as a paid performer, causes Kid Jones to feel alienated from the name on the billboard. As scholar Arthur Knight discusses, the commodification of jazz obscures the relationship between performance and the performer:

Under mass mediation, music does not simply float as sound carried through air away from its giving, producing, social bodies; it is captured and carried away, to be re-presented under circumstances whose relation to the sound's 'original' affiliated sight and story may be very different. (6)

Taken up as a symbol of rebellion, sexuality, loose morals, primitivism, or as a panacea for the angst of modernity⁸⁷, jazz and jazz musicians were constantly being “re-presented” in contexts often distant from the performer’s motivations. Frustrated that the audience’s gaze creates a narrative he cannot control Kid Jones sits down in front of the mirror in his dressing room wishing his emotions could be transformed into visual signifiers; “He hadn’t changed any. Same face. No fatter. No thinner. No gray hair. Nothing. He frowned. Because he felt that the things that were eating him up inside ought to show. But they didn’t” (165). Longing to distance himself from the identity on the billboard, Kid Jones examines his body, hoping that his internal struggles will somehow become tangible in his outward appearance. This method of imagining identity through visual signifiers challenges the hypervisibility of his persona as a performer.

⁸⁷ As described by Lawrence W. Levine in his essay “Jazz and American Culture”; “...jazz was often...praised *and* criticized for being innovative and breaking with tradition. It was praised *and* criticized for being a form of culture expressing the id, the repressed and suppressed feelings of the superego which enforced that attitudes and values of the bourgeois culture...It was, in short, praised *and* criticized for being almost completely out of phase with the period’s concept of Culture” (438).

However, it is only after he leaves the dressing room, steps onto the stage, and begins to perform that the narrative actively blurs the distinction between Kid Jones' external environment and the internal machinations. Although he does not engage with anyone in the band verbally, it does not take long before he "made a mental note of the fact that the boys were working together as smoothly as though each one had been oiled" (165). Regardless of his internal tumult and his feelings of personal hatred for the Marquis of Brund, the countless hours of practices and many performances together reflect "the marvel of social organization" (Ellison 189) that constitutes group improvisation. When Petry describes how "The long gray curtains parted. One moment they were closed. And then they were open. Silently. Almost like magic." (165), she signals an invocation of performative ritual that ties the band to the audience, one another, and long-standing traditions of African-American cultural expression. This could be any theater, any stage, or any set of musicians, but when the curtains open there is always a possibility for transcendence, or a sound that exposes the limits of the self. The technical mastery of the instrument and an understanding of tone, timbre, and scale are vital to jazz musicians, but the possibility for spatial and temporal transcendence emerges from what scholar Travis A. Jackson describes as the "ritualization" of African-American musical-oral aesthetics. Rather than create direct correlations between narratives of past and present or between the individual and the group, African-American musical traditions thrives on creating "different ways of understanding and intervening in the world around them" (Jackson 143). The music is a form of entertainment, but it is also a cultural repository where sound becomes a narrative of internal and external environments. As Jackson argues:

...the shared interpretive moves of performers and other participants with other performers... are not so much signs *of* something prior, but signs that might have demonstrable *connections to* something. That is, they mobilize events, actions, and understandings external but related to a performance for resignification, in the process remaking the ritualized activity and producing ritualized social agents and social bodies. (153)

By prioritizing the expression of individual identity and creativity in relationship to the group, black aesthetic practice converses with the past through the immediacy of experience in the present. Kid Jones is consumed by his own memories and emotions, but when he enters into the “ritualized activity” of performance he must express not only his own narrative, but reveal its “*connections to*” the band, the outside world, and black aesthetic traditions. Although there was often a constant striving amongst bebop musicians to “transcend conscious, rational thought” (Floyd 140), Petry strives to destabilize her reader’s perception of the music or the subjectivity of the players as equivalent to “magic.” Bound to both improvisation and cultural memory, the music is “almost” beyond explanation; tradition informs the performance even if it is not immediately registered by the audience.

In fact, as the performance begins, Petry highlights the interplay between the members of band as vital to the process of remembering and recreating the past. Capturing the ephemeral quality of music through language, she describes how Kid Jones “hit the drums lightly. Regularly. A barely discernable rhythm. A background. A repeated emphasis for the horns and the piano and the violin” (166). By mimicking the subtle rhythmic changes of the drums through slightly variations in description, Petry focuses on Kid Jones

role as both a mediator between players and a participant in the creation of their narratives.⁸⁸ When the trumpet begins to play “so high that his stomach sucked in against himself...until he was filled with it and sighing with it” Kid Jones engages with his own past as though it were embodied in the sound of another. The memory is so visceral and the sound so powerful that “He wanted to cover his ears with his hands because he kept hearing a voice that whispered the same thing over and over again...‘I’m leaving I’m leaving I’m leaving” (166). Repeated multiple times throughout the narrative, the phrase “I’m leaving” anchors the relationship between the aural and the affective in Petry’s narrative. The music causes uncontrollable physical reactions, remembrances of words he would rather forget, and carries him, against his will, “straight back to the rain that had come with the morning” (166). No longer able to distinguish between the “long blue note of the trumpet” and the “rain and wind [that] cried softly outside the window”, Kid Jones lets himself be metaphorically carried away from the theater and the sound altogether.

He half closed his eyes and rode up on it. It had stopped being music. It was that whispering voice, making him shiver. Hating it and not being able to do anything about it. ‘I’m leaving it’s the guy who plays the piano I’m in love with him and I’m leaving now today.’ Rain in the streets. Heat gone. Food gone. Everything gone because a woman’s gone. It’s everything you ever wanted, he thought. It’s everything you never got. Everything you ever had,

⁸⁸ As scholar Joachim-Ernst Berendt notes, “Unlike the metronome, whose ‘tick-tock’ rigidly stays on its own path, the jazz drummer holds the tempo and also functions as a part of the highly nuanced interaction between musicians—a factor that helps to create and define the quality of improvising. Drummers are like the navigators of jazz. They do not merely accompany; rather, they also point the way, define the course” (468).

everything you ever lost. It's all there in the trumpet—pain and hate and trouble and peace and quiet and love. (166)

Like the “naturally veiled and half articulate” (DuBois 185) messages of the spirituals and the elongated phrases of the blues’ note⁸⁹, jazz music places an emphasis on the ability of the performer to communicate a narrative and, in doing so, connect their own experiences to both black aesthetic tradition and the experiences of others. Contesting the boundaries between language and sound, the narrative focuses on Kid Jones’ memory at the moment the sound “had stopped being music.” From the “shiver” that appears as he replays the scene over and over again in his mind to the feelings of “pain and hate and trouble and peace and quiet” that he cannot separate or escape in that instant, the trumpet comes to signify experience even as it tries to reach beyond its boundaries. What the experience of his wife leaving eradicates from his body (“Heat gone. Food gone. Everything gone.”), the music returns through memory and attempts to transcend through sound. His wife is no longer simply an agent in his own emotional distress, but becomes a symbol for “everything you ever had. Everything you ever lost.” Described as “storying” by scholar Nick Young, this method of creation “is both a tradition and a form; it is what links artfulness as diverse as a solo by Louis Armstrong—which... brilliantly tells a story—with any of the number of stories (or tall tales or ‘lies’ or literature) black folks tell among and about themselves” (17). The potential that the “you” of this sentence could be directed at

⁸⁹ W.C. Handy describes the elongated note as such: “In the example first given it will be noted that each line of the words occupies considerably less than the allotted four bars, leaving a long wait before the next sentence and phrase begin. This is typical, and important. It affords the improviser... a space in which his next idea may go through its period of gestation...But to us it is of far greater interest that...he can utilize this space, not as a hold, but as a *play-ground* in which his voice or instrument may be allowed to wander in such fantastical musical paths as he pleases...” (8).

Kid Jones, the reader, or the audience also indicates the subtle ways Petry shapes language to indicate the multiplicity of meanings that can emerge from any one jazz performance.

This is particularly important as she shifts from the internal dialogue of Kid Jones to one of the few moments in the story where the audience's perspective is addressed. The audience who, as we have seen earlier, have sustained feelings of happiness or excitement when they think of Kid Jones or see his name in lights, comes to the performance with a preconceived notion of who Kid Jones is and what his music stands for. Suggesting that these presumptions are often linked to visual signification in public forums, Petry focuses on the stage as a site of obfuscation, or a place where the audience is not concerned with his individual subjectivity, but the public persona they have created in their mind.

The long beam of white light struck the top of his head and turned him into a pattern of light and shadow. Because of the cream-colored suit and shirt, his body seemed to be encased in light. But there was a shadow over his face, so that his features blended and disappeared. His hairline receding so far back that he looked like a man with a face that never ended. A man with a high, long face and dark, dark skin. (167)

Just as the audience is supposed to completely affix their attention on Kid Jones, the spotlight transforms him into a simplified and dichotomous representation, or "a pattern of light and shadow." This exemplifies the paradoxical relationship between jazz as a commodity for mass consumption and a tradition of individual creativity and improvisation. In contrast to the form of the record, which is "enclosed and completed" and "amenable to appropriation as a commodity", jazz performance introduces the listener to

“the transient and disembodied form” of the music (Johnson 3).⁹⁰ Kid Jones appearance under the spotlight highlights the tension between these two forms of representation by treating him as both an object of reverence and a misrepresented, transhistorical subject whose image is created and maintained by consumer culture. To many in the audience, he simply looks “like a man with a face that never ends. A man with a high long face and dark, dark skin.” This homogenization of Kid Jones image into a vague, featureless character gestures towards the problem of “seeing” in a culture where African-American musicians are frequently conflated with problematic, but widely circulated tropes about jazz and jazz performance.⁹¹

However, as Petry reminds us in her return to Kid Jones perspective, sight often belies sound. Just as the jazz ensemble emphasizes “simultaneous expressions of multiple approaches to a single musical idea” (Jimoh 28), Petry’s inversion of the audience’s speculative gaze reveals multifarious affective responses to the band’s music.

The theater throbbed with the excitement of the drums. A man sitting near the front row shivered, and his head jerked to the rhythm. A sailor put his arm around the girl sitting beside him, took her hand and held her face still and pressed his mouth over hers. Close. Close. Close. Until their faces seemed melt together...A kid sneaked in through the side door and slid into an aisle

⁹⁰ Focused on the many ways jazz “is highly resistant to commodification”, Johnson (1993) also addresses how technological reproduction and the discourses of Modernity have deformed the processes of jazz to either commodify or canonize the art.

⁹¹ As Paul Lopes (2005) discusses, the 1920s and 30s representations of jazz as a symbol of moral deviance and rebellion took on a slightly different characters in the 1940s: “Black beboppers rearticulated the trope followed by a community of hipster musicians...this trope would articulate these codes as embedded in the moral boundaries of pulp fiction, film noir, and crime journalism—as rebellion versus conformity, as deviancy versus normalcy, as authenticity versus professionalism, and as triumph versus tragedy” (1469).

seat. His mouth was wide open, and he clutched his cap with both hands, tight, and hard against his chest as he listened. (167)

In the rapid and successive description of the audience members, Petry demonstrates how the unifying “excitement” of the drums and its repetitive rhythms (“Close. Close. Close.”) have the ability to produce highly individuated and often contradictory responses to the music. Punctuated by unpredictable physical movements, sexual innuendo, and an act of breaking into the theater, this scene mimics the “strange double consciousness of romantic rebellion and potential danger” (Lopes 1469) perpetuated by images of jazz in commodity culture. Despite the fact that jazz aesthetics insist on spaces where these binaries can productively coalesce, the audience is engaged in “a theater of popular fantasies” (Hall 113) that obscure the relationship between Kid Jones narrative and their own experiences. Although the two lovers share a vague association to him and his wife and both Kid Jones and the man in the front row “shiver” at the sound of the trumpet, the obfuscations of the market have made it impossible for them to clearly communicate those shared yearnings.

It is precisely at this moment of representative tension that Petry turns her attention to the break, or Kid Jones first solo. Described by Albert Murray as “the disjuncture which is the moment of truth” (112), this temporary disruption of the song’s formal constraints frees each individual artist to explore the teleological boundaries of their own identity. As Fred Moten argues in his book *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (2003) black performance emerges from narratives of discontinuity and rupture, or moments when the performer reaches beyond their objectified and commodified state towards an “uncontainable outside” (26). Momentarily freed from the perceptions of the audience and the constraints of group ensemble, Kid Jones returns to the

memory of that morning, but this time he “forgot he was in the theater. It was only he and the drums and they were very far away. Long gone.” (167). More than a narrative of his wife leaving or a remembrance of the rain as it “dripped down the window panes”, the music allows Kid Jones to integrate the immediacy of the present and into a complex and layered recollection of the past. Petry’s narration of this scene suggests that creating a linear or coherent image of the past in the present is extremely difficult. As Kid Jones plays, his memories become feelings, sensations that he cannot escape as he attempts to make sense of his identity: “He was holding Lulu, Helen, Susie, Mamie close in his arms. And all of them—all those girls blended into that one girl who was his wife. The one who said ‘I’m leaving.’ She had said it over and over again, this morning, while rain dripped down the window panes” (167). Although he cannot completely articulate the connections between these women, the remembrance of them gestures towards a shared intimacy, a love that “blended” from one woman to the next until they all become an echo of the one woman he can’t forget, the one woman who repeatedly says, “I’m leaving.” This moment during the break allows Kid Jones to compress the past and present, to understand these women as an invocation of the self which has varied greatly, but combined to create the sense of self he is currently communicating through song.

As the present begins to once again intrude on his dream-like recollection of the past, Kid Jones abandons the narratives of the women from his past and begins to fantasize about killing the Marquis of Brund. By directly correlating the sound of the drums as “they leaped with the fury that was in him” with his vision of “putting a knife clean between [the Marquis’] ribs” (168), Petry attempts to capture the range of emotions that go into the music and the flexibility of time in the confines of the break. The music incites recollection,

but it also enables the player to visualize the future within the confines of the present. It is also possible that this scene captures the fantasies of subversion that jazz, and particularly bebop, attempted to communicate during this time.⁹² Described by Eric Lott as a genre of “calculated hostility” (462), bebop insisted on “blinding virtuosity” as the primary weapon in the fight against the continued appropriation and exploitation of black cultural producers.⁹⁴ Kid Jones may only be thinking about himself, but the combination of his visual presence and the aural affects of his music (love, pain, hate, desire, etc.) have the potential to be taken up by other musicians or the audience in any number of ways. As Petry notes, even the brief exploration of this aural rage produces “a faint astonishment” in the members of the band. Like Kid Jones earlier remembrance, they understand the emotion, but they cannot decipher its connection to the specific narrative it attempts to communicate.

Returning to the break, Kid Jones memories begin to take the form of visions that combine of his own past with his imagination of experiences that took place in vastly different spatial and temporal localities.

The drums took him away from them, took him back, and back, and back in time and space. He built up an illusion. He was sending out the news.

Grandma died. The foreigner in the litter has an old disease and will no

⁹² While author Paul Devlin (2015) attempts to correlate Kid Jones with a drummer from Count Basie’s band in the mid-late 1940’s, he does so without evidence from the text, only from the time period. Since Petry never discusses this topic, it is impossible to know if it is based on a real character and even more presumptuous to assume you can. I am presenting bebop as a possibility, as a gesture towards the dynamics of music at the time, but in no way endorse my view as the only, or in fact, the wholly correct opinion on the subject.

⁹⁴ Look for a source or two that talks about the commodification of swing and the transition into bebop. [Do this in final read through]

recover. The man from across the big water is sleeping with the chief's daughter. Kill. Kill. Kill. The war goes well with the men with the bad smell and the loud laugh. It goes badly with the chiefs with the round heads and peacock's walk. (168)

By describing the reactions of the listening audience and then offering a narrative of the multifarious and intersecting origins of the sound, Petry's story models new ways for the reader to hear black performance.⁹⁵ Blending together the narrative of his grandmother's death, his wife's adultery, and the meta-narrative of New World explorations⁹⁶, this scene relays the ability of music to create connections heretofore unacknowledged by Kid Jones or the reading audience. While the failed intimacy with his wife causes him to create "an illusion" of the past, this eventually gives way to a more profound commentary on the collective past, or the losses and fragmentations that connect African-Americans together regardless of individual experience. A series of veiled analogies, Kid Jones no longer speaks of his wife and the Marquis, but of "the man across the big water [is] sleeping with the chief's daughter" and the impulse to "Kill. Kill. Kill" that emerges from this interaction. The repetition of the word kill also echoes the sentiment of Kid Jones earlier violent fantasies and replicates, with revision, the "Close. Close. Close" faces of the audience described earlier. Yet, beyond these imaginings a much more profound narrative emerges. While the

⁹⁵ Josh Kun's (2005) observations about the act of listening in James Baldwin's "Sonny's Blues" are also relevant here; "Baldwin urges us to become a listener...By listening to his brother play in a live jazz band...the story's narrator comes to understand the importance of listening as an emancipatory performance...the act of performance is a way of living through music, of surviving through music, of grasping liberation through music" (91).

⁹⁶ As Gayl Jones notes in her reading of this scene, "The broader social-historical context, significant to the intent of the story, reclaims an aesthetic which reinforces the narrative and dramatic vision of the New World story" (97) From *Liberating Voices* (1991)

“war goes well” and continues to go well for those the white audiences who control the representation of black subjects, for the artist, or the ancient lineage of the chief “it goes badly.” No matter how good his style, or “peacock’s walk” is, Kid Jones understands that his narrative will still emerge within and be controlled by the raced and gendered narratives of the New World.

Offering no indication of how these sound musings are received by the audience or the band, Petry remains in the midst of Kid Jones psyche as his memories shift the overall tone and mood of the music. From colonialism and its afterlife to the first time he meets his wife, the reader must adjust, with Kid Jones, to the changing scenery of his mind:

It is cool in the deep track in the forest. Cool and quiet. The trees talk softly. They speak of the dance tonight. The young girl from across the lake will be there...Then the words he wanted to forget were all around Kid Jones again. “I’m leaving. I’m leaving. I’m leaving.” He couldn’t help himself. He stopped hitting the drums and stared at the Marquis of Brund—a long, malevolent look, filled with hate. (168)

This momentary respite from the intense emotional interactions that have characterized the narrative indicate Kid Jones’ desire to replicate a different time and another image of his wife. Yet, he cannot get past the immediacy of the moment; the repeated phrases of the morning and the presence of the Marquis shatter the illusions and memories he has built up in his mind. As Petry describes, “He couldn’t help himself”; playing no longer provides the reconciliation he seeks, so he stops to stare at the Marquis “with a long malevolent look, filled with hate.” For a split second, Kid Jones toys with the idea of action, of a communication independent from the act of performance. However, the silence creates a

tension in the audience, or a “restless, uneasy movement” (168) that threatens to disrupt the divisions between their expectations of black performance and the actual realities that inform those expressions. This discomfort only lasts a split second before Kid Jones “remembered where he was” and enters back into an exchange with the trumpet player.

After several riffs, Kid Jones realizes he must once again enter into the break: “He knew a moment of panic. He had to solo again and he wasn’t sure he could do it” (168). In order to take the fragments of the past and create a new articulation of the self in the present, Kid Jones must wrestle with feelings of fear and uncertainty. As Albert Murray describes, this moment of tension is both a necessary and important feature of the break:

The break is an extremely important device from both the structural point of view and from its implications...The moment of greatest jeopardy is your moment of greatest opportunity. This is the heroic moment...It is when you establish your identity; it is when you write your signature on the epidermis of actuality. This is how you come to terms with the void... (112)

When entering into the “invagination, rupture, collision, augmentation” (Moten 26) that characterize the break, the artist must engage with temporal and representational instability. In the face of aesthetic and racial homogenization, Kid Jones must create a space where he can ‘write’ his own stories and establish his own genealogies. For it is in those moments, when visual and discursive representations no longer suffice, that you “establish your identity”, or take your sound and “write your signature on the epidermis of reality.”

When Kid Jones hits the drums for his final, and greatest, solo, he immediately feels,

...as though the drums were talking about his own life...He forgot the theater, forgot everything but the drums. He was welded to the drums, sucked inside

them. All of him. His pulse beat. His heart beat. He had become part of the drums. They had become part of him. (168)

At this vital moment, Kid Jones begins to feel as though he has become the mechanism of his expression. He is no longer speaking, but it is drums that are communicating his narrative; they become “his pulse beat. His heart beat.” Even if only for a moment, Kid Jones must forget his body in order to remember. He is not dissociated from the fear, love, hate, violence, and sadness of his narrative, but is able to understand how they have shaped and are continuing to shape his identity. As scholar Gayle Walde notes in her research on African-American performance, “musicians may perform transcendence, but they do not transcend their bodies; rather, they come into fuller possession of them, realizing their musical possibilities” (690). In order for Petry to capture the ephemeral and intense moment of improvisation, she needs to describe the feeling of disembodiment, or the moment when the narrative of performance becomes “welded” into sound, into something beyond speech. Once his wife, the Marquis, the audience, his mother, all the women he ever loved, the chiefs, the trumpet, and the pain are temporarily assuaged, he can issue back to something else, to what Ralph Ellison calls those “indefinable aspects of experience which nevertheless help make us what we are” (198).

He made the big bass rumble and reverberate. He went a little mad on the big bass. Again and again he filled the theater with a sound like thunder. The sound seemed to come not from the drums but from deep inside himself; it was a sound that was being wrenched out of him—a violent, raging, roaring sound. As it issued from him he thought, this is the story of my love. This is

the story of my hate, this is all there is left of me. And the sound echoed and re-echoed far up under the roof of the theater. (169)

While the listening audience hears the emotions of Kid Jones through the deep, reverberating, repetition of the drums and the “violent, raging, roaring sound” that fills every corner of the theater, the reading audience is offered a much more complex insight into the player’s psyche. Petry’s story reminds the reader, as Ralph Ellison does, that to enter into jazz is to enter “into quite a different sphere of training. Here it is more meaningful to speak, not of courses of study, of grades and degrees, but of apprenticeship, ordeals, initiations, ceremonies, of rebirth” (208). The sound is not a simple extension of his subjectivity, but an emotion being “wrenched out of him” by the fragmentations and losses of the recent and distant past that “echo and re-echoed” as Kid Jones attempts to shape sound into a new narrative of identity.

When Kid Jones emerges from the performance and back into the sphere of the theater, Petry notes that “he was trembling” and “his body was wet with sweat.” This physical reaction offers an image of rebirth, an extrication and a cleansing that results from the rigors of performance, the lights, the emotions, and his one final exploration into the void that constitutes the self. Yet, Petry understands that no matter how profound the moment, it is still just a transient and inimitable expression that must always return to its material realities. This is why she does not end the story at the conclusion of his solo, but returns as she began, with Kid Jones understanding of himself as an object of commodification and entertainment.

He was surprised to see that the drums were sitting in front of him. He was still himself. Kid Jones. Master of the drums. Greatest drummer in the world.

Selling himself a little piece at a time. Every afternoon. Twice every evening. Only this time he had topped all his other performances. This time, playing like this after what had happened in the morning, he had sold all of himself—not just a little piece. (169)

After returning to himself and the limited space of the theater, Kid Jones realizes that all the performances up to this point were only partial utterances, or instances in which he was, for the satisfaction of others, “selling himself a little piece at a time.” He knows this is his greatest performance ever, however he must also negotiate with the fact that this sound and image of him will be released back into a market that determines value in ways completely dissociated from the narrative he presents. He “had sold all of himself” and knowing this, he cannot be happy. In fact, he only feels further alienated from the audience and the band. This gestures towards the materiality of performance, or what Fred Moten describes as the tension between the commodified object and the ability of sound to augment or rematerialize black subjectivity in the break. These instances of the commodity speaking, which Moten characterizes in sounds that range from Aunt Hester’s scream to Billie Holiday’s moan, illuminate both the internal and external dialogues, or material and immaterial nuances of black performance. As Moten argues:

This is the story of how apparent non-value functions as a creator of value; it is also the story of how value animates what appears as nonvalue. This functioning and animation are material. This animateriality—impassioned response to passionate utterance—is painfully hidden and disclosed always and everywhere in the tracks of black performance and black discourse on black performance. (18)

When another band member kicks Kid Jones and says “Bow you ape. Whassamatter with you?” (169), they are imploring him to be recognized, to accept “that impassioned response to passionate utterance” as an indicator of his value. Petry’s use of the word “ape” is not coincidental. Juxtaposed, in the very next line, with a mechanized image of Kid Jones bowing “Like a—like one of those things you pull on a string and it jerks, goes through the motion of dancing. Pull it again and it kicks”⁹⁸, these final lines offer two dichotomous and false representations of his subjectivity. He is neither the bi-product of rapid industrialization or a relief from it through the innate emotional intensities associated with primitivism, but a performer whose narrative remains “painfully hidden and disclosed” behind narratives that inform their music, before, during, and after the act of performance. Although Kid Jones thinks to himself “Yeah...you were hot all right”, he cannot shake the echo of his morning of the moment that his wife said “I’m leaving it’s the guy who plays the piano I’m in love with the Marquis of Brund he plays such sweet piano I’m leaving leaving leaving—” (169). The lack of punctuation stands in stark contrast to Petry’s previous strategy of writing narrative as a musical performance, but it does so deliberately. The performance is over, the riffs and notes that inflected his representation of himself gone.

Conclusion

No matter how Kid Jones song is interpreted outside the boundaries of his performance, Petry is interested in the immediate, affective relationship between music and memory.

⁹⁸ It is surprising that scholars have not noted the similarity between this scene and Chapter 20 of *Invisible Man* (1950), when the narrator sees Clifton selling Sambo dolls on the street. As Ellison describes the dolls, “A grinning doll of orange-and-black tissue paper with thin flat cardboard disks forming its head and feet and which some mysterious mechanism was causing to move up and down in a loose jointed, shoulder-shaking, infuriatingly sensuous motion, a dance that was completely detached from the black, mask-like face.” (431)

Despite the multiple layers of history that coalesce and the affective responses it produces in the audience and himself, Petry insists on bowing out of the performance just as Kid Jones does. She leaves the reader to grasp with the potential narratives that follow the performance, her interest is in revealing the mechanism of historical memory, how artists arrange and rearrange images of the past to create a more complete image of the present. As Ralph Ellison describes in his 1955 essay "Living With Music":

Perhaps in the swift change of American society in which the meanings of one's origins are so quickly lost, one of the chief values of living with music lies in its power to give us an orientation in time. In doing so, it gives significance to all of those indefinable aspects of experience which nevertheless help to make us what we are. In the swift whirl of time music is a constant, reminding us of what we were and of that toward which we aspire. Art thou troubled? Music will not only calm, it will ennoble thee. (198)

In Petry's narrative the reader is "living with music", they encounter the past as the artist does and resolve the temporal compressions within the context of the player's experiences. However, what Ellison describes also extends beyond the individual and into the sentiments of the group. For the generation who grew up listening to bebop in the 1940s and 50s, the music captured the what Eric Lott describes as the "militancy of its moment". In the fight for "Double V", or victory at home and abroad, bebop "attempted to resolve at the level of style what militancy fought in the streets." (Lott 458) No longer willing to assimilate into the dominant, and frequently racist, ideologies of white America, these artists cultivated "strategies of differentiation" (Lott 460) through sound. They reflected a spirit of defiance, a shift in "the address, the stance, the attitude" (Jones 193) of the African-

American community as they returned home from war only to find that Jim Crow and segregation maintained a stranglehold on their political, economic, and social existence. Furthermore, in its rebellion against mainstream culture, bebop “put on a more intellectually and psychologically satisfying level the traditional separation and isolation of the black man from America. It was a cult of protection as well as rebellion” (Jones 200). By embracing a spirit of defiance and a sound that “distanced them from the black middle class and the white consensus” (Lott 462), bebop modeled a form of cultural separatism that Black Power and Black Arts Movement writers would eventually transform into concrete political action.

Chapter 4

Locating a Political Past: Music and the “Performative Politics” of Freedom in Sonia Sanchez’s *We A BaddDDD People*

In his 1964 review of Leroi Jones’ groundbreaking text *Blues People: Negro Music in White America* (1963), Ralph Ellison notes that “Its introductory mood of scholarly analysis frequently shatters into a dissonance of accusation, and one gets the impression that while Jones wants to perform a crucial task...he is frustrated by the restraint demanded of the critical pen and would like to pick up a club” (Ellison 248). In conflict with Ellison’s view of literature as a social democratic expression of the American experience as much as the African-American experience⁹⁹, Jones’s text (and his later work) reflects an emerging political and artistic attitude of frustration, an aesthetic in which writing itself would function as “a club.” Calling for a new black art and a new conception of the place culture should play in politics, Baraka issued a bold and visceral call to action: “We want ‘poems that kill.’/Assassin poems, Poems that shoot/ guns. Poems that wrestle cops into alleys/ and take their weapons leaving them dead/ with tongues pulled out and sent to Ireland” (*Black Fire* 302). Inspired by Malcolm X, efforts of decolonization in Africa, and the renewal of Black Nationalist philosophies of self-determination and self-identification, Black Arts Movement writers became “assassins” of any political or social institution perceived to block the efforts of black liberation. The assertion that language is indeed a weapon and carries “performative” power, or the ability to be injurious and/or affirming, has been

⁹⁹ As Ellison notes in his 1953 essay “The Seer and the Seen”, “The artist is no freer than the society in which he lives, and in the United States the writers who stereotype or ignore the Negro or other minorities in the final analysis stereotype and distort their own humanity.” (*Shadow and Act*; 1953) Morrison also echoes this sentiment in her book *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*; 1992)

addressed by scholars such as Judith Butler and J.L. Austin¹⁰⁰. Their scholarship contributes to my reading of the Black Arts and Black Power movements as an era of “performative politics.” Insisting on action as it emerges from careful reflection, this aesthetic sought to transform injurious language and narratives into a calculated physical, emotional, political, and social response. As Butler discusses in her text *Excitable Speech* (1997), when a group is repeatedly attacked through language, it can create temporal interruptions and confusions: “To be addressed injuriously is not only to be open to an unknown future, but not to know the time and the place of injury, and to suffer the disorientation of one’s situation as an effect of such speech” (4). A response to distorted or silenced representations of African-American history and subjectivity, the Black Arts Movement sought to rectify these temporal “disorientations” through the destruction of previous narratives and the implementation of new social, political, artistic, and economic imperatives. As activist Hoyt Fuller describes, the Black Arts Movement was in the “business of destroying those images and myths that have crippled and degraded black people, and the institution of new images and myths that will liberate them” (Fuller 346). Emphasizing a comprehensive agenda for inter and intra-racial affairs, this program of aesthetic and political activism rested upon not only the reclamation of language, but on action felt, seen, and heard. New clothes, slang, poetry, theater, visual arts, and music carried liberatory power and designated as such, redefined how African-American communities might engage culture to explore their own history as well as the dominant historical narratives that distorted or erased that history.

¹⁰⁰ See Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (1997); J.L. Austin, *How to Do Things With Words* (1962) for more on the effects of language as they are uttered and how to judge speech acts in relationship to their context and effects.

A central apparatus in this project was the discussion of music as a communal site of social consciousness and innovation throughout American and African history. Insisting that music constituted a powerful cultural vector for the discussion of the past and present, BAM artists and critics “proclaimed music as the poetry of the people. Rather than existing for merely entertainment value, music, as the highest of the Black art forms had the potential...not only to chronicle or reflect revolution, but to actually create and participate in it” (Ongiri 139). Music offered a performative and liberatory form of alternative historiography, troubling the distortions of dominant historical narratives and the presumed sociological stasis they implied.¹⁰¹ Through multifarious aesthetic techniques and across musical genres, African-American musicians attempted to complicate African-American subjectivity through virtuoso performance. As Amiri Baraka describes:

[Music] was the history of the Afro-American people as text, as tale, as story, as exposition, narrative, or what have you, that the music was the score, the actually expressed creative orchestration, reflection, of Afro-American life, our words, our libretto, to those actual, lived lives. That the music was an orchestrated, vocalized, hummed, chanted, blown, scatted, corollary confirmation of the history. And that one could go from one to another...and be talking about the same things. The music was explaining the history as

¹⁰¹ What I am referencing here are the multiple myths created about African-Americans to justify slavery and many other forms of racial violence. These include, but are not limited to, the fear of the black rapist, primitivism and historical distortion of African history (as discussed in Chapter 1), the myth of the Mammy and the Jezebel, and the emasculation of male African-American identity through lynching and the prison industrial complex. See The Moynihan Report, or “The Negro Family: The Case for National Action (1967); Angela Davis, *Women, Race and Class* pgs. 3-30, 172-202 (1981); Deborah Gray White *Ar’n’t I A Woman* (1985); Ida B. Wells, *Southern Horrors and Other Writings* (1997).

the history was explaining the music. And that both were expressions of and reflections of the people! (*Blues People* ix)

Suggesting a sustained, perpetual, and self-reflexive relationship between African-American music and history, Baraka identifies musical aesthetics as offering the most complex and dynamic form of American historiography to date. Not simply the relaying of facts or the reflections of oppression, music provided the “text”, “tale”, “story”, “exposition”, or “narrative” of African-American people as it was “vocalized”, “hummed”, “chanted”, “blown”, or “scatted” into wider American culture. Deliberately drawing a relationship between writing, orality, and aurality *Blues People* argues that music provides a historical record created by and for the African-American community. Freed from the proscriptive narratives of the white community, gave access to “those actual, lived lives” and, in doing so, allowed the community to draw relationships between their past and present.¹⁰²

One of the most visible female poets of the Black Arts Movement, Sonia Sanchez entered into this political and aesthetic environment well versed in the Black Nationalist political agenda and the limitations of its rhetoric. Inspired, like many others, by Malcolm X and the revival of Black Nationalism throughout the 1960's, Sanchez's early poetry and, in particular, her volume *We a BaddDDD People* (1971) offers a rare glimpse into the collective efforts to create artistic and social change throughout the period. Invoking images of Malcolm X, Franz Fanon, Elijah Muhammad, John Coltrane, and Billie Holiday, her volume (still her longest to date) is clearly inspired by and supports the Black Nationalist project. Yet, it is not simply poetic political rhetoric. In the nuances of her inventive style,

¹⁰² As the black feminist movement would note, this constructions of the black community often ignored the experiences of women of color as an invaluable part of this new historical constitution. See “Combahee River Collective” (1977). Scholars such as James Smethurst have also noted how

Sanchez frequently prioritizes social action over the very art she is creating, conscientiously reminding her readers of language's limited capacity to create new systems of living and being in the world. Her "performative" poetic aesthetic is vital, but mean nothing if it does not incite the community to comprehensively change the political world it addresses. Through the use of musical figures, African, and African-American aesthetics, Sanchez presents history as an active and activating force, and poetics as the performative medium which provides the knowledge of reflection and the principles of action. Billie Holiday, John Coltrane, and African drums not only provide a musical correlative capable of transforming the language of Malcolm X and Franz Fanon into a vividly multi-generational struggle for social and human justice, but also offer an important site for debates about the efficacy of previous historical narratives and aesthetics in their current struggles for freedom.

Although several texts of the period addressed gaps and distortions in historiography¹⁰³, their emerged a series of debates about the place of music, and specifically the blues, in the creation of new cultural symbols. Concerned with white appropriation, the urgency of the present, and the appearance of black music as assimilationist in any way, avant-garde jazz artists such as John Coltrane, Archie Shepp, Sun Ra, and Charles Mingus (among many others¹⁰⁴) were viewed as "no longer [able to] realize the basic social and emotional philosophy that has *traditionally* informed Afro-American music" (*Blues People* 235). Aesthetic revolution became the perfect accompaniment to

¹⁰³ See Albert Murray *The Omni-Americans* (1970); *Black Studies in the University: A Symposium* (1969); Melvin Drimmer, *Black History: A Reappraisal* (1968); John Henrick Clarke "Reclaiming the Lost African Heritage", *Black Fire!* (1968).

¹⁰⁴ A.B. Spellman, Max Roach, Albert Ayler, Pharoah Sanders, Ornette Coleman, Herbie Nichols, Jackie McClean, and Eric Dolphy were also considered examples of this new black aesthetic.

political revolution. While writers such as Sanchez and Ron Karenga presented the blues as a reflection of resignation in the face of oppression, many others, including Albert Murray and Larry Neal viewed the music as an authentic and invaluable form of cultural expression. A method for activating historical narrative and aesthetics in the present, Sanchez creates poetic conversations with Holiday that both admonish her inability to act, and mourn her incapacity to distance her music from assimilationist narratives. This not only exemplifies the “performative” capacity of poetry to compress the past and present, but also reveals the difficulty of representing female voices in an era that consistently pressured African-American women to prioritize race over gender.¹⁰⁵

To establish the context for the emergence of Sanchez’s poetry, the chapter will first consider the importance of historical narrative in relation to cultural practice through a number of political and social figures. This includes, but is not limited to, Amiri Baraka, Larry Neal, Franz Fanon, Stokely Carmichael, Addison Gayle, James T. Stewart, Albert Murray, and Sonia Sanchez herself. The final sections will turn more specifically towards Sanchez’s engagement with music, presenting the blues debates through the figure of Billie Holiday, and analyzing the inspiring political aurality of John Coltrane’s transcendent musical philosophies. Taken together, these conversations demonstrate the ability of African-American music to reshape how the actions and aesthetics of the present are informed and catalyzed by the past. Offering the possibility for alternative historiographies through black aesthetic practices that are often characterized as counter-intuitive to white,

¹⁰⁵ As scholar Cherise A. Pollard (2006) discusses, “One aspect of conventional arguments about black women poet’s contribution to the movement is that these women wrote poetry that unquestionably supported their ‘brothers’ struggle for equality. It was often assumed that race took precedence over gender” (178).

western constructions of history, Sanchez's volume enhances the audience's understanding of themselves as political actors and participants in a longer tradition of resistance.

Malcolm X, Franz Fanon, and the Development of the Black Nationalist Aesthetic and Political Meta-Narrative

From his infamous proclamation that the "chickens had come home to roost" after President Kennedy's death, to his 1964 call for "The Ballot or the Bullet", and his consistent proclamations that "we want freedom by any means necessary"¹⁰⁶, Malcolm X articulated the pressing problems of the nation in a voice that demanded immediate action and violence, if necessary. Sparking a widespread revitalization of Black Nationalist politics across the nation, Malcolm X, as Sonia Sanchez notes, "articulated what we all thought. For many of us, Baraka and rest, he gave us a voice. That's why many of our poems became so angry at that time...Malcolm cut through a lot of crap in this country and put out in the open what many young people were thinking and didn't know how to articulate" ("As Poets, As Activists" 88-89). Capturing the growing frustrations of the nation, Malcolm X developed a political and cultural ideology that placed African-Americans and people of color around the globe at the center of historical narrative rather than the periphery. Viewing white society as a system of cultural, political, and social oppression, the Black Nationalism promoted two separate, but deeply intertwined tasks: 1) To begin thinking of history as something that must necessarily be disengaged from the political, social, economic, and cultural histories of the white community 2) To create a space in which new

¹⁰⁶ "The Ballot or the Bullet", see Malcolm X (1990), See 1964 speech at the "Founding Rally of the Organization of Afro-American Unity" for "by any means necessary". Figure out how to footnote exactly.

symbols of black empowerment and new visions of reality could be produced. As Malcolm X stated in his 1964 essay “Statement of Basic Aims and Objectives of the Organization of Afro-American Unity”:

We must recapture our heritage and our identity if we are ever to liberate ourselves from the bonds of white supremacy. We must launch a cultural revolution to unbrainwash an entire people...This cultural revolution will be the journey to our rediscovery of ourselves. History is a people’s memory, and without a memory man is demoted to the lower animals. Armed with the knowledge of the past, we can with confidence charter a course for the future. Culture is an indispensable weapon in the freedom struggle. We must take hold of it and forge the future with the past. (Malcolm X 563)

Viewed as a weapon in the ongoing struggle between white supremacy and black movements for social, cultural, and political self-determination, the assessment and reclamation of historical narrative form the basis of Malcolm X’s call for a “cultural revolution.” Insisting on the active role memory and culture must play in rethinking historical narrative, he calls for narratives that will “recapture our heritage and our identity” and, in the process, begin to “unbrainwash an entire people.” A means of renewing the community from the inside out, this aggressive interrogation and reformation of historical narrative provides a way “to forge the future with the past.”

This sense of looking toward the definitions of the past with a critical eye and utilizing that information to begin redefining the notion of freedom became vital to the efforts of organization and would be further galvanized after Malcolm’s death on February 21st, 1965. To those already frustrated by the politically charged death of Patrice

Lumumba, a Congolese leader of the global anti-colonial struggle, who many felt was murdered with the help of western powers, Malcolm X's death was only a further catalyst for social change. Despite the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, racial oppression remained persistent, sparking violent protests which were, "paradoxically promoting a feeling of new political and cultural possibility as well as frustration" (Smethurst 369). Despite the fact that Malcolm X's death had "emotionally fractured young black radicals", Larry Neal notes that, "there were two central facts that all factions of the movement came to understand...that the struggle for self-determination had entered a serious, more profound stage; and that for most of us, nonviolence as a viable technique of social change had died with Malcolm on the stage of the Audubon" ("On Malcolm X" 128-129). Taking up Malcolm's call to alter the fabric of the nation and the globe through self-determination, thousands of young activists began to view the movement for African and African-American liberation as at a critical, "profound stage" of cultural and political development.

The Black Arts Movement captured the spirit and vehemence of Malcolm for nearly ten years after his death¹⁰⁷ by creating art that could take control of the intellectual fortresses of American society. Honing in on the liberatory potential of culture and education, activists began pressing for departments of African and African American studies, participating in public forums, staging plays, and popularizing new images of African-American men and women. Every aspect of black life had become a weapon against

¹⁰⁷ James Smethurst (2005), in tracing the variations amongst the movement and their importance relative to the larger movement, identifies the Black Arts Movement as lasting from, roughly, the early 1960's through the mid 1970's. Although Malcolm's voice would remain influential in later cultural realms, including hip-hop, for the purposes of this chapter, I am noting his influence during the time period noted above.

the oppressive conditions and histories of the nation. Committed to securing the community from any and all white violence, formulating a new agenda for education, and drawing out plans for the social and economic independence of African-Americans, the Black Nationalist party developed a comprehensive program that embraced cultural workers as vital to the project of black liberation. As noted in the manifestos of the Student National Coordination Committee and the Black Panther Party, culture and cultural reeducation were viewed as equally important in the political meta-narrative of the groups:

If we are to proceed towards true liberation, we must cut ourselves off from white people. We must form our own institutions, credit unions, co-ops, political parties, write our own histories. (“SNCC: The Basis of Black Power” 155)

We want education for our people that exposes the true nature of this decadent American society. We want education that teaches us our true history and our role in present-day society. We believe in an educational system that will give our people a knowledge of self. If a man does not have knowledge of himself and his position in society and the world, then he has little chance to relate to anything else. (“The Black Panther Platform: What We Want, What We Believe”)

With calls for the community to “write our own histories” and create an “education that teaches us our true history and role in present-day society,” many artists and writers began taking up the challenge to reconsider historiography, specifically as it related to African and African-American cultural and social experiences.

Admonishing those who for hundreds of years (“straight off the mayflower”) believed that their hatred and disgust for white America was unsubstantiated or simply wrong, Sanchez’s poem “there are blk/puritans” echoes Black Nationalist calls for solidarity through historical recognition and reclamation. Accusing many African-Americans of reflecting the ideology of the oppressor, Sanchez points out how there are those:

who would have u
 believe
 that the word
 fuck/ u / mutha / fucka
 is evil.
 un / black. (17)

Viewing assimilation as a rhetoric of passivity as old as the country itself, Sanchez calls for a semantic shift, a belief that anger is not “un / black”, but a method of understanding the past in relation to the present. Calling for all “puritans” in the black community to begin addressing “the real/ curse/ words of our time”, such as “CA/ PITA /LISM”, “blk/pimps”, “nixonandco”, and “missanne/ rocke/ FELLER”, the poem addresses major systemic issues rather than petty inter and intra-racial debates over ‘foul’ language. To move towards a state of freedom and self-determination, the community needs to stop accusing one another and begin focusing on the real enemies (and bedfellows), capitalism and political corruption. Presenting the historical narratives of assimilation and capitalism side by side, the poem reclaims the past to send a message to the present. As she states in the final lines:

there
 are blk/puritans amongst us
 who must be told that
 WITE/AMURICA
 is the
 only original sin. (17)

Announcing that assimilation is no longer necessary, she also calls for those reading to “tell” others about the past that is obfuscating their ability to understand the current political, social, economic, and cultural circumstances of the country. She also subtly addresses the paradox of Christianity by reminding her reader that “WITE/AMERICA /is the/ only original sin”. Harkening back to a mythic past even further removed from the

landing at Plymouth Rock, the poem questions the validity of addressing any other sins besides those repeatedly enacted by white America on the black community.

Extending this focus to transnational as well as national relationships, BAM demonstrated a renewed interest in Africa and the struggle for independence from colonial nations that had been occurring throughout the 1950s and 1960s. Informed by the works of international revolutionaries such as Frantz Fanon, Patrice Lumumba, Che Guevara, and the Marxist revolutionary tradition, the Black Nationalist and Black Panther Party promoted a parallelism between African revolutionaries and African-American struggles for freedom:

Panther theoreticians...adopted the view that the experience of Black people in America paralleled that of colonized people under the traditional colonialism. Party leaders maintained that the Black community in America constituted an internal colony suffering from cultural destruction, White economic exploitation, and racial oppression by an occupying White police force (Clemons 28).

Focusing on the struggle for freedom as tied to oppressive state apparatuses rather than related specifically to one nation, the Black Panther Party, and Malcolm X before them, sought to create solidarity with several colonized and recently colonized African nations and their leaders.¹⁰⁸ In addition, many artists and activists adopted an Afrocentric historical philosophy, choosing to elide the history of slavery in favor of empowering and

¹⁰⁸ Groups such as the African Liberation Support Committee and the Congress of African People played a major role in educating and gathering continued support for colonized and newly liberated African nations. See also Cedric Johnson, "'From Popular Anti-imperialism to Sectarianism: The African Liberation Support Committee and Black Power Radicals'" (2003); Michael Simanga, *Amiri Baraka and the Congress of African People: History and Memory* (2015).

positive images of African and Middle Eastern cultures. As Molefi Kete Asante discusses in his essay on “On Historical Interpretations”:

Afrocentricity appropriates all African history in the United States and elsewhere but it does not announce some instinct for living in the past. The past is alive only to the degree that we capture it in our own depths...By studying the past I can be judged by how deeply I go in appropriating my history for the present moment of living. (18)

To learn about the past is not to envision historical stasis, but to consider its influence on the activities of the present. Positive historical and cultural appropriation allowed for people to make history “alive” within themselves and their expressions. Power, whether aesthetic, political, economic, or social, only emerges when history is a process, when “we capture it in our own depths” and create positive self-worth and value in the African-American community. Connecting the ancient and recent history of Africa with American issues of oppression, Sanchez’s poem “To Fanon” encourages reflection, but only to the extent that it creates organized political action. This compression of the past and present encourages a move from ideology to action and visual representation to the development of new histories and new cultures; as the full title of the poem states; “To Fanon, culture meant only one thing—an environment shaped to help us & our children grow, shaped by ourselves in action against the system that enslaves us” (*We a BaddDDD People* 50).

Opening with the blunt admission that “the cracker is not to be played with”, the poem reminds the reader that “the evillllll he does is not new cannot be resolved/ thru rhetoric/ hate/ poems”. Immediately prioritizing social action over the very art that she is creating, she points towards the limited capacity of language to create new systems of living and

beginning to define it for themselves. And as they get in a position intellectually to define freedom for themselves, they see that they don't have it, and it makes them less peaceful, or less inclined towards peace.

("Prospects for Freedom" 156)

By developing an intellectual, social, and aesthetic environment for knowledge, the African-American community can begin "to define freedom for themselves" and, with that knowledge, can begin to reclaim oppressive ideologies through action. Fearing that the Black Nationalist movement had simply created a new set of symbols associated with a false freedom, Sanchez reminds her reader to focus on community organization and revolutionary political practice:

the master is
mas/ter/ful.
is the SUPREME ANIMAL of
destruction and cannot be destroyed with only:
long dresses – swahili – curses – soul food –
fervor – dashikis – naturrrals – poems –
SOUL – rage – leather jackets – slogans –
polygamy – yoruba
WAR. DISCIPLINE. LEARNEN.
LAND. PLANNEN. LOVE. AND.
POWER. (51)

In this passage, Sanchez critiques those visual signifiers that, despite their appearance, have been ineffective in truly supporting efforts of liberation. The style and mythic quality of African-ness invoked by declarations of "Swahili" and "Yoruba", and the wearing of "dashikis" and "leather jackets" are only effective to the extent that they support "WAR. DISCIPLIEN. LEARNEN...POWER." Concerned with the visual aesthetics of politics as well as the philosophical commitment to African revolutionary politics and the concept of Africa as a wellspring of culture yet to be narrated, many writers and poets engaged in the reclamation of an African past and present that could strengthen the African-American

calls for freedom. Addressing the use of Africa as a metaphor that “often signifies the psychological space in which African-Americans can decolonize their minds” (112), Margo Natalie Crawford goes on to address the physical transformation that accompanied the movement and the persistent focus on becoming “new” through the embrace of an African identity:

...it partakes in the performances of racial and cultural identities that hinge upon constructs of an original or true self. During the Black Arts and Black Power Movements, as people made ‘Africa’ the very signifier of roots and a lost home, they often adopted African clothing and hairstyles and assumed African (generally Swahili) names...Black Arts writers often represented their ‘negro’ identity as the false badge/the involuntary passing that occurred through the violence of post-slavery trauma and anti-black racism. (113)

Targeting the idea that Africa was a space bereft of historical and cultural value, African-American artists and writers embraced the cultural histories and representations of African nations. Allowing them to elide the “false badge(s)” of slavery and the representations associated with “anti-black racism”, they attempted to create new selves, selves they could reclaim through African heritage what was suppressed through slavery and other forms of institutionalized racism.

While Sanchez does not openly condemn these practices, she views them as secondary to the discipline and organization necessary to enact real and revolutionary change. Controlling economics rather than style, developing plans rather than slogans, and acquiring power over more than simply naming is her goal. As she forcefully states in the

final lines, “we the hunters need/ to destroy/ the BEAST/ who enslaves us.” (51) Slavery, whether in old or new forms, can only be addressed through a change in everyday attitude and the action that accompanies it. Although those in the Black Nationalist and Black Arts Movements did not wholly elide the history of slavery, it was often suppressed in favor of an Afrocentric historical philosophy that appropriated African visual and cultural signifiers in an effort to strengthen the political goals of the period.

By incorporating music and specifically African drums and chanting methods into several of her poems¹¹⁰, Sanchez’s volume reflects this desire to create positive historical images of self-worth and lineage. Reflecting the necessary balance between understanding external enemies and the creation of internal symbols that could sustain the movement, “listenin to big black at s.f. state” once again calls for action over words. Opening with the pronouncement that there should “no mo meetings/ where u talk bout/ whitey. the cracker/ who done u wrong”, the poem instead focuses on “maken warriors/ outa boys./ blk woowomen/ outa girls” (*We a BaddDDD People* 48). Instead of talking about degradation, the poem insists on a new generation of young men and women who will feel empowered by “moven in &/ out of blkness”. To focus on the “400/yr/old/road/show” is only the beginning; the deceptions and illusions developed by white America must be overwhelmed by the empowerment of the black community. This concept of the “road/show” also implies movement, the travel of ideology from place to place and the shifting ideologies that have persistently persecuted people of color for over 400 years, and the spectacular quality of their development. The degradations of the past are now an

¹¹⁰ See also “we a baddDDD people (for gwendolyn brooks a fo real bad one)”, “life/poem”, “poem for etherdige” *We a BaddDDD People*, Broadside Press, 1970.

language development, the drums tap into a heritage that was forcibly negated or refused for several hundred years. Experimenting with a poetic style that could positively represent the drums while communicating their importance, Sanchez imbues sound with a linguistic voice, reminding the reader that “Africans also used drums for communication; and, not as once was thought, merely by using the drums in a kind of primitive Morse code, but by the phonetic reproduction of the words themselves” (Jones 26). A bridge between politics and art, the drums mediate the language of Malcolm X, Imamu Amiri Baraka, and Elijah Muhammad. Aesthetically echoing theorist Stephen Henderson’s assertion that “any serious appreciation of [black poetry] must rest on a deep and sympathetic knowledge of black music and black speech” (31), the poem prioritizes musical and oral innovations as necessary to addressing the political, social, economic, and cultural status of the community.

However, Sanchez’s presentation of music was not uniform, nor did it simply endorse all forms of African-American musical expression or cultural history as valuable in organizing the community or inciting political and social justice. As I discuss in the following section, the blues became a major point of contention for BAM artists and critics, particularly when thinking about how historical narrative must be molded to reflect the political potential of the present and future. Frequently viewed as a reflection of past oppressions rather than decisive action, the debates around the blues reveal the difficulty in creating an aesthetic historiography informed by politics and performance. Although viewed by some as an authentic and invaluable form of cultural expression, many others heard the blues as a reflection of past oppressions and assimilationist attitudes. Adopting the blues as an oppressive (rather than redemptive) form of black cultural expression,

Sanchez's Billie Holiday poems address the complexity of intra-racial dynamics during the period. These poems also reveal the oft-overlooked implications of gender and its place in the Black Nationalist movement more generally.

The Blues, Black Nationalism, and Billie Holiday

Despite the fact that many activists agreed on the widespread necessity for cultural separatism and the particular power of music to reflect the struggles and aspirations of the black community, the types of musical forms most suited to reflect these goals were constantly being debated. With the movement deeply immersed in reformulating history and historical narrative to empower the black masses in the "now", negotiating the bounds of previous musical genres was problematic at best. It was not simply that "the models" for a black aesthetic "must be non-white", but also that the forces of production, the control over the economics and the distribution of black music needed to move outside the bounds of assimilation (Stewart 3). Responding to both the call for revolutionary action and the growing blues revival by white musicians and fans of the early to mid 1970s, many political and cultural leaders began to denounce the musical form and its historic legacy. As scholar Adam Gussow notes, the growing association of the blues with white audiences, performers, magazines and record companies invoked a number of inter and intra-racial debates:

...the Black Arts Movement's desire to reclaim and define the blues as a black cultural inheritance rather than a Negro 'contribution' to American culture was being pressured by the truly daunting emergence of a mass white blues audience...the white culture-industry seemed determined to overwhelm any Black Arts separation-and-purification scheme by capitalizing on white

omnivorousness for all things blue, recasting black ancestral lines of descent in a way that seemed anathema to black radical aesthetics. (235)

As with almost every African-American musical form, the question of white appropriation and entertainment became a major point of contention for emerging black poets, writers, politicians, and cultural leaders. Concerned with the blues revival drastically “recasting black lines of descent”, the Black Arts Movement began to consider the validity of past musical forms in relation to present political concerns. With the principles of cultural separatism and revolution “by any means necessary,” foundational to Black Nationalist politics, the blues attitude began to appear as an “anathema,” a reflection of decidedly non-revolutionary practices.

For leaders such as Ron Karenga, “Black art, like everything else in the black community, must respond positively to the reality of revolution” (477), meaning that new art must be developed for new circumstances. Prioritizing the present and the future over the past, Karenga argued that art must reflect the journey towards liberation:

Therefore, we say the blues are invalid; for they teach resignation, in a word acceptance of reality—and we have come to change reality. We will not submit to the resignations of our fathers who lost their money, their women, and their lives and sat around wondering “what did they do to be so black and blue.” ...We will not cry for those things that are gone, but find meaning in those things that remain to us. Perhaps people will object violently to the idea that the blues are invalid, but one should understand they are not invalid historically. They will always represent a very beautiful, musical and psychological achievement of our people; but today they are not functional

because they do not commit us to the struggle of today and tomorrow, but keep us in the past. And whatever we do, we cannot remain in the past, for we have too much at stake in the present. (Karenga 482)

If one of the primary goals of the movement was to destroy culturally embedded symbols of self-hatred, exploitation, Western oppression, and assimilation, then that meant doing so on both sides of the line. Creating new symbols of empowerment meant moving past previous conceptions of black life in order to radically shift the semantic and cultural boundaries “of today and tomorrow.” Narrating the blues as a form of historical stasis, Karenga’s essay argues that art “lives through us and through the meaning and message we give it” (481); to embrace the blues means promoting an “acceptance of reality” rather than revolutionary possibilities. Entering into a long historical debate regarding black aesthetics and their obligation to politics¹¹¹, Karenga urges his audience to reject “any art that does not discuss and contribute to the revolution”(478). For him and many others, the past needed to be carefully sifted and analyzed for its ability to contribute to the present. This meant appreciating, but not praising the blues, recognizing them as a valuable contribution, but understanding that they are ultimately an unfit cultural symbol for the Black Arts or Black Nationalist movement.

Responding to Karenga’s powerful invalidation of the blues as a necessary aesthetic for the present, Larry Neal defended the music by attempting to position it as part of an African-American folkloric and radical tradition. Drawing parallels between the “mean

¹¹¹ I am thinking here of W.E.B. DuBois pronouncement in his 1926 essay “Criteria of Negro Art” that “I do not care a damn for any art that is not used for propaganda” (22). Also, the differences in writers such as Richard Wright and Ann Petry echo this concern with how black aesthetics can or cannot create political change.

horn” of Coltrane and the “mean and evil” people identified in the blues, Neal hopes to draw the two traditions closer together than previously assumed. Similar to Black Nationalist calls for social empowerment, Neal insists, “[The blues] means daring to be, to feel, to see” (110) in ways that were muted by middle-class politics of respectability¹¹² or racist ideologies of primitivism. Derived from “work songs, jubilees, gospel songs, and spirituals” (112), the blues maintained much of the ritualistic and spiritual qualities of the past, while modifying those folk forms to reflect a secular worldview. Professing never to be physically or emotionally enslaved again, Neal argues that the blues songbook spoke visceral truths in the face of both white and black middle-class resistance. This straightforward evaluation of the world, while not always openly rebellious, was vital to developing a working class attitude that was “basically defiant in their attitude towards life” (109). By openly discussing sex, love, transience, joy, and pain, the blues reveal “an ideology of a new ‘proletariat’ searching for a means of judging the world” (108). Expressing “the conscious and unconscious spirit of that community”, the blues allowed the “most gut level of human existence” to permeate the music, creating an art that was both rebellious and transcendent in its own right. Drawing further associations between the blues and the present, Neal also argues for a historical genealogy that recognizes the blues singer’s “ritual role in the community which links him to the traditional priests and poets of Africa” (113). Embracing the ritualistic spirituality of the past allows Neal to temper Karenga’s political stance and

¹¹² Originally defined by Evelyn Brooks Higgenbotham (1993) as a “discursive contestation” of racist beliefs through the conformity of African-American communities to “dominant society’s morals and manners”, this term has come to be associated with assimilation, patriarchal, and class-based estimations. See also Frances E. White, *Dark Continent of Our Bodies: Black Feminism and the Politics of Respectability* (2001).

our blue/nites. (41)

At first glance, the poem appears as a lament in the vein of Karenga, however Sanchez opens up the possibility that Holiday's genius was foreclosed by the societal restrictions and assimilationist tendencies of the time period in which she lived. Unable to be easily defined by the media of her time¹¹³ and often misunderstood after her death, Holiday came to represent two contradictory images of the black female genius. As scholar Farah Jasmine Griffin notes, "Holiday is often portrayed as a tragic, talented woman who is a self-destructive victim. On the other hand, she lives on the edge, she transgresses, she wins recognition and respect within the male realm of jazz" (32). While there is clearly an enormous respect for her talents, Sanchez cannot help but express frustration for all the songs Holiday "wud have swung/ gainst this country's white mind" and the lyrics that "wud have pushed us from our blue/nites." Almost exclusively singing about longing, loneliness, love, false hopes, failed relationships, and the transience of stability in an emotionally unstable world,¹¹⁴ Holiday's work left no room for the action demanded by Sanchez and her contemporaries. Possibility lurks everywhere in the poem, with songs that "wud have swung" violently against white racism and "pushed" the community from reflection to action. Although she forcefully captures the "most gut level of human existence" ("Ethos" 108) described by Neal, Sanchez retroactively laments her inability to *do* more. This

¹¹³ See Farah Jasmine Griffin (2001), pgs. 28-35 for an account of how the media during her time attempted, often unsuccessfully, to contain Holiday within familiar boundaries such as those of the Mammy, the Tragic Mulatto, the over-sexed and over-ambitious bi-racial woman, and the middle-class race woman who is "perhaps beautiful, but never sexual" (30).

¹¹⁴ While Angela Davis (1998) does an excellent reading of Billie Holiday's "Strange Fruit" and the political influence of the song, it is one of the only overtly political songs in Holiday's catalog. It is more her style of singing, her engagement with audiences, the genius of her artistic choices, and (often unfortunately) her personal life that have shaped her legacy.

compression of the past and present prioritizes politics over personal expression and like “listenin to big black as s.f. state,” argues for the replication and renarration of historical legacies that tap into the revolutionary possibilities of the past. However, as the poem continues, Sanchez begins to engage in troubling gender associations, an act that is surprising considering her own position as a woman in a movement dominated by male figures.

yeh. billie.
if some blk / man
 had reallee
made u feel
 permanentlee warm.
ain't no tellen
 where the jazz of yo/songs
 wud have led us.

Creating a formal unity through the repetition of the phrase “ain’t no tellin,” Sanchez is able to retain the lament of the earlier sections, however now she attributes Holiday’s failure as a political revolutionary to her lack of a “blk/man” who “made u feel/permanentlee warm”. As scholar Cheryl Clarke notes in her analysis of the poem, “despite [Sanchez’s] astute practice of telling it ‘like it damn sure is’ ...of drawing the obverse relationship between Black people’s progress and white America’s, Sanchez chalks up Billie Holiday’s thwarted promise to the lack of the right kind of romance in her life” (64). Subsuming the talents of Holiday under the need for strong black male leadership and love, the poem not only contradicts other presentations of gender in the volume¹¹⁵, but seems to willfully prioritize a masculinist ideology of revolutionary politics. Holiday’s potential as a leader, as someone who “wud have led us” to unseen territories is cut short

¹¹⁵ See “blk/ woocommerce/ chant” and the prologue to the volume for varying views on gender and its relationship to the Black Nationalist movement.

by the instability of her personal life and the absence of a strong male figure to focus her energies. With the Black Nationalist and BAM's overwhelming focus on recovering black manhood¹¹⁶, many female poets were expected to, as Cherise A. Pollard discusses "subsume their own gendered interests and silence their own voices...In order to put black men at social and political ease, black women were expected to assume a position of passivity" (178). While Sanchez does not suppress her own voice, her poem centers its political philosophy around a seemingly passive female singer whose potential for historic change is thwarted by her own failed relationships. This creates an implied contrast between Sanchez as a writer/activist/ prophet and Billie Holiday as an influential, but ultimately ineffective political figure.

A conduit for both cautionary and revolutionary historical narratives, Holiday once again takes center stage in Sanchez's "liberation/poem". Creating a parallel between musical and political history, the poem refutes the blues aesthetic in the opening lines, stating, "blues ain't culture/ they sounds of oppression" (54). Closely aligned with Karenga during the opening section of the poem, Sanchez views the blues as a reactionary cultural expression rather than a complex cultural form. Critiquing the blues as a reaction "against the white man's/ shit/ game he's run on us all", the poem presents the music as predicated on a relationship with the same white power structure the Black Nationalist agenda was attempting to eradicate from the African-American community. The current political project and its call "for the right to create our own terms through which to define ourselves

¹¹⁶ See also Cheryl Clark, *After Mecca : Women Poets and the Black Arts Movement*. (2005), pgs. 1-22; Roland Murray, "How the Conjure-Man Gets Busy: Cultural Nationalism, Masculinity, and Performativity" (2005); Matthew Hughey, "Black Aesthetics and Panther Rhetoric: A Critical Decoding of Black Masculinity in The Black Panther, 1967—80." (2009).

i say
 no. sweet / billie.
 no mo. (54)

Sanchez is clearly familiar with the tradition she invokes, gesturing towards the power of Holiday's "soul / ful / sighs" and her rhetorical question "am i blue". However, she immediately snaps back to the present, noting that despite the power of the blues, all she can now think is "no. sweet / billie. / no mo". Writing Holiday as a sentimental figure, Sanchez can create a valuable negation, a moment in which Holiday's voice permeates the present, but invokes revolutionary anger rather than sorrowful contemplation. This form of cultural-historical engagement reflects the self-referential quality of African-American music and literary development, the reactions to previous forms of expression and their relation to the current social, political, and cultural attitudes of the present. Continuing her detailed references to the blues, the final lines of the poem intertwine images and dialect associated with the blues to reinforce the Black Nationalist goal of understanding the past in order to more accurately narrate the present and future.

no mo
 blue/ trains running on this track
 they all been de/railed.
 am i blue?
 sweet/ baby/ blue/
 billie.
 no. i'm black/
 & ready. (54)

As several scholars have noted (Davis, 1998; Baker; 1984), the image of the train station as a place that enabled travel and freedom through movement, Sanchez finds this notion of freedom represents an unsuccessful search for liberation, therefore she 'derails' them

within the poem in the service of promoting a new kind of action. The individual autonomy and secular freedom of the train is no longer a sufficient weapon in the progress towards liberation. Sanchez's words, her invocation of action, throw all the old trains, or ideologies of the self, off the track and in their lieu, prepares her audience and herself for new forms of self-identification. Creating a conversation with Holiday through the second invocation of her song title, Sanchez talks back to the past, asking "am i blue?" and responding decisively "no. i'm black/ & ready" (54). She is ready for violence against racist forces, ready to promote action over endurance, and liberation over longing. By riffing on the familiar blues song "what did I do to be so black and blue?"¹¹⁷, Sanchez simultaneously acknowledges the rebellious aesthetic of the past while offering a new aesthetic and social vision for the future. She understands the importance of the question, but disavows the necessity of waiting for an answer. The avant-garde jazz movement, led by John Coltrane, offered not only the answers Sanchez was looking for, but the aesthetic attitude necessary to transform these reflections into meaningful reactions.

Sonia Sanchez, John Coltrane, and the Revolutionary Character of the Avant-Garde Jazz Movement

Touted as capturing the spirit and innovation of political and social leaders in music, artists such as Archie Shepp, Nina Simone, John Coltrane, Max Roach, and Sun Ra became aesthetic representations of the new cultural symbols necessary to support the revolution. Calling for control of their production, pay in clubs, complete artistic freedom, and an end to

¹¹⁷ Do a brief history of the song and how Louis Armstrong transformed its lyrics into what one could argue is a powerful protest song. Potentially add reference to Invisible Man as well to create further genealogy.

record companies' practices of paying miniscule royalties to jazz artists, these musicians adopted a series of principles that were deeply aligned with the Black Arts Movement and the call for black controlled institutions and aesthetics.¹²⁰ In addition, these artists and Coltrane specifically were interested in reflecting what scholar Gerald Early defines as a "regenerative, mythic blackness, expressed completely as an act of will against the temptations and blandishments of the white world" (377). An inheritor of the rebellious bent of the bebop culture, Coltrane's music continued to push the limits of jazz style, but did so through a form of intense spirituality rather than what Scott Saul defines as the "ironic hipsterism" (212) of his predecessors. Imbuing his music with a seriousness that constantly reached towards the transcendent, Coltrane's music became a natural link between the attitudes and revolutionary actions of the Black Nationalist movement.¹²¹ Saul notes in his analysis of Coltrane's style:

Infused with a militant spirituality, it seemed to reconcile opposites into a needful synthesis—and thus mimicked a broader movement in American cultures of dissent, which both critiqued the violence of American society (as manifested in the Vietnam war, police brutality, and so on) and appealed to the need for forceful retribution. (234)

Continuing to draw a relation between the musical and political histories of the African-American community, Sanchez's final poem of the volume addresses the "militant

¹²⁰ For more on the alliance between BAM and jazz musicians see John D. Baskerville, "Free Jazz: A Reflection of Black Power Ideology." *Journal of Black Studies* 24.4 (1994): 484-97

¹²¹ For more information on John Coltrane, the John Coltrane poem, and their relationship to Black Nationalist ideology, see also Larry Neal, "On Malcolm X" (1989); Stephen Henderson's *Understanding the New Black Poetry*(1973), pgs. 238,261; Amiri Baraka, *Blues People*(1963), pgs. 175-237; Sascha Feinstein "From 'Alabama' to 'A Love Supreme': The Evolution of the John Coltrane Poem" (1996).

African-American perspective. Replicating Coltrane's experimental form, Sanchez modifies the nursery song "Frère Jacques" to address the literal and metaphoric assassination of the black community.¹²² After a brief replication of the song's lyrics, she then states:

no mornin bells
are ringen here. only the quiet
aftermath of assassinations.
but i saw yo/murder
the massacre
of all blk/musicians. planned
in advance. (69)

Despite the ability of black leaders and musicians to change the political and aesthetic fabric of the country, they have been stunted by a perpetual cycle of capitalist and systemic violence. Interrupting the understood structure of the song to present an alternative versification, Sanchez recalls how "the massacre/of all blk/musicians" was enacted through their perceived antagonism to white, western forms of music. A narration of historical continuity that is often silenced and overlooked, the exploitation of black musicians, similar to the death of black leaders, were always "planned in advance" by American racism and its attendant aesthetics. That is until Coltrane's horn, like Sanchez's poetry, "blew away our passsst/ and showed us our futureeeeeee." Demonstrating the ability of BAM artists to replicate the spirit and aesthetics of the free jazz movement, this early section "proves that [Sanchez] has internalized, in both verse and voice the dialogisms in Coltrane's music...[she] converts the nursery melody into an invocation, in vernacular, to a jazz deity" (Marcoux 131). Prefatory to the introduction of Coltrane's horn into the poem, this section presents an aesthetic "invocation" to the performative politics of history. Sound and

¹²² See Jean-Philippe Marcoux, *Jazz Griots: Music As History in the 1960s African American Poem* (2012), pgs. 128-132 for more on "Frère Jacques" and Sanchez's engagement with the Rodgers and Hammerstein original of "My Favorite Things."

language work in concert to eliminate the oppressions of the past and create new aesthetic, poetic, and political standards for the future.

Immediately launching into an onomatopoeic representations of Coltrane's familiar "screech screeech screeeeech screeech" of the horn, the poem replicates the improvisational techniques of his music through the manipulation of punctuation and the modification of the song title:

a/love/supreme. a lovesupreme a love supreme
 A LOVE SUPREME
 scrEEEccCHHHHHH screeeeEEECHHHHHHHH
 sCRreeeEEECHHHHHHHH SCREEEECCCCHHHH
 SCREEEEEEEECCCHHHHHHHHHHHH
 a lovesupremealovesupremealovesupreme for our blk
 people. (69)

Enhancing the intensity and genius of his improvisation, the scream of Coltrane's horn appears to inflect the pronouncements of the album title surrounding it. This subtle, but deft poetic technique reminds the reader of Coltrane's ability to transmit narratives through sound. Kimberly W. Benston's 1977 essay "Late Coltrane: A Re-membering of Orpheus" also echoed praise for Coltrane's transcendent musical narration, noting how "the world became regenerated inwardly by the musical afflatus...Ultimately, passages in Trane's music became so bright and so piercing that the sounds seemed to be words, or cries deeper than words." (770) Through poetry, Sanchez can sound the revolutionary aesthetic sound and political theory of the period; the screech of the horn captures the call to "BRING IN THE WITE/MOTHA/fuckas/ ALL THE MILLIONARIES/ BANKERS/ol/MAIN/LINE/ ASS/RISTOCRATS...WHO HAVE KILLED/WILL CONTINUE TO/ KILL US" (69). Like the sound of Coltrane's horn, the poem blows away the past in search of a new future. It creates a new narrative of political action, becomes an inspiration to "PUSHem/PUNCHem/ STOMPem...till no mo/ raunchy sounds of MURDER/

POVERTY/STARVATION/ come from they throats” (70). This violent eradication of the “raunchy sounds” of inequality creates space for new political, cultural, and aesthetic voices. Repeated again shortly after this call for violence, Coltrane’s screech is further imbued with the spirit of black radical politics, coming to represent what scholar Sasha Feinstein explains as “...the angry expression of African-American demands for justice, for equality of opportunity....Coltrane’s sound was frequently described as a scream, and the scream became, in some cases, a way to vent outrage at the white establishment... (Feinstein). Represented as an open challenge to capitalist and racist forms of oppression, Coltrane’s scream/screech captures material realities through aural transcendence. This ability to convey emotion in its most pointed and honest declaration blurs temporalities, reducing racist ideologies to their historic continuities and revolutionary freedoms to the creative capacity of the community. In contrast to the stasis of the past, Sanchez repeats the screeching of Coltrane’s horn once again, only this time imbued with the creative capacity to call for compensatory action.:

BRING IN THE WHITE/LIBERALS ON THE SOLO SOUND
 OF YO/FIGHT IS MY FIGHT
 SAXOPHONE.
 TORTURE
 THEM FIRST AS THEY HAVE
 TORTURED US WITH
 PROMISES/
 PROMISES. IN WITE/AMURICA. (70-71)

The horn itself gains agency in this section, becoming, like the African drums in earlier poems, a communicative method, a way of calling the community together and enabling them to invert the cycle of broken promises “THEY HAVE/TORTURED US WITH”. Just as the language of promises was useless to African-Americans in the past, so the call for their refutation will be useless in the present; she wants the action invoked by the music to

liven.

a love supreme.
 for each
 other
 if we just
 lissssssSSSTEN. (72)

The music, like the politics, is “for each other,” another way to show the community their own strength and convince them of the attitudes necessary to enact change. As a poet who explores the boundaries between genre forms and politics, Sanchez becomes an interpreter of aesthetic nationalism, or as Jean-Phillipe Marcoux identifies her, a “jazz griot.” Described as “the ideal agents of cultural re-inscription; [the griot’s] art answered the needs for self-knowledge and self-love, notions so important to both revolutionary and cultural nationalisms” (8). Cultural storytellers, griots served the role of genealogist, historian, advisor, interpreter, translator, witness, and musician to the African-American community.¹²³ A mediator between musical aesthetics and Nationalist calls for “performative politics”, Sanchez’s blues and jazz poetry presents historical narrative as an active and activating agent in the development of the black radical tradition and art as the aesthetic conduit that activates historical reclamation. Intergenerational and self-reflexive, music does not disregard history, but incorporates it into an aesthetic vision of the present and a roadmap for the future, “if we just/ lissssssSSSTEN.”

Conclusion

As can be seen in her discussions of John Coltrane and Billie Holiday, Sonia Sanchez is attempting to formulate an implicitly gendered voice of the new cultural revolution. By

¹²³ Marcoux goes in to much more detail about each of these roles in *Jazz Griots: Music As History in the 1960s African American Poem* (2012), pgs. 10-19

embracing the radical aesthetics of avant-garde jazz and the political philosophies of black nationalism, Sanchez is leading the way in fashions she felt Billie Holiday never could.

While her critique of Holiday could be read as an anti-feminist sentiment in the midst of movement already dominated by male voices, it is more suitable to consider its position in relationship to her work moving forward. Committed to issues of gender throughout her career, many of Sanchez's poems highlighted the importance of women in the continued fight against oppression. As she states in her 1974 volume *A Blues Book for Blue Black Magical Women* "& know that Black/mennNNN/ must be left alone to TCB for the nation/ for our children for our people./ but after/ many talks if they don't listen/ then they must be expelled/ from the nation/builders" (18). While she is committed to political solidarity, there is the growing sense that women's voices deserve a more prominent place in the continued development of solidarity. Even when her poems took on a less radically political stance in the 1980s and 1990s, she was still carving out space for the narratives of her own life and those of so many black women she had met and imagined. She also continues to invoke music as a form of memory, as a way to transform the narrative of young black men and women into historical echoes and visions of the future. As she discusses in her 1985 poem "A Song":

take my virginity
and convert it to maternity
wait around a century or two
and see what i'll do.

take my body give it yo' brand
stitch my breasts on the fatherland
wait around a decade or two
and see just what i'll do.

place my dreams on any back stair
tune my eyes for yo' nightmare

wait around a century or two
and see what i'll finally do.

suck my breath until i stutter
listen to the sounds i utter
wait around a decade or two
and see just what i'll do.

take my daughter one sunday morn
drape her in dresses to be torn
wait around a century or two
and see what i'll finally do.

bury me early all dressed in white
find yourself a brand new wife
wait around a decade or two
and see what she'll finally do.
and see what she'll finally do. (29)

Built like a blues refrain, each stanza addresses the possibilities of black women and the pains they will continue to endure before the world will “see what i’ll finally do.” Although the last lines undercut the current of emotional memory that builds, Sanchez does this in an intentional blues voice, as a sort of way to echo Langston Hughes famous sentiment of “laughing to keep from crying”. In addition, the poem has a sense of things undone, of records yet to be recorded, and voices to be heard. This anticipated expansion of the canon resonated throughout the 1970s with the revitalization of interest in works by Zora Neale Hurston and Nella Larsen, as well as the emergence of authors such as Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, Maya Angelou, Toni Cade Bambara, Gayl Jones, Octavia Butler, Audre Lorde, and Gloria Naylor. The 1980s saw all of these authors continuing their work as well as the release of *The Schomburg Library of Nineteenth-Century Black Women Writers*. Exploring everything from science fiction to the history of slavery, 1920s African-American communities, autobiographies, narratives of the Civil Rights movements, and

contemporary politics, these women, Sanchez included, expanded the temporal boundaries and memory of African-American narratives.

Chapter 5

The Writer as Jazz Ensemble: Fragmentation and Temporal Dislocation in Toni Morrison's *Jazz*

Dislocation, defined as “the action of dislocating, or condition of being dislocated” (*OED*), has emerged as a major concern of African-American literature and theory over the past 200 years. Addressing both the “action” and the “condition” of being dislocated, these texts often explore both the violent degradations of the body *and* the psychological condition or state of mind that accompanies this process. As described by scholars Saidiya Hartman and Hortense Spillers, the commodification of black bodies under slavery created “overdetermined nominative properties”, or “markers so loaded with mythical prepossession that there is no easy way for the agents buried beneath them to come clean” (Spillers 203). By reducing “the captive body to an abstract and empty vessel vulnerable to the projection of others’ feelings, ideas, desires, and values” (Hartman 21) the Middle Passage not only fractured cultural and familial bonds, but created a series of ontological dislocations, or the separation of black subjects from their “motive will” and “active desire” (Spillers 203). As Toni Morrison discusses in her 1990 essay *Playing in the Dark* and critiques in the prose of her 1992 novel *Jazz*, this reduction of people to physical characteristics and emotional pathologies often dissociates them from their personal and community histories. Creating what I identify as a series of “temporal dislocations”, or instances in which Morrison’s characters cannot reconcile their personal past with their understanding of the present, these New World ideologies permeate the silence and violence of every character. What is unique about Morrison’s novel is its deliberate attempt to manipulate time and narrative structure through the aesthetics of the jazz and the jazz ensemble. Set in the 1920s, but recalling narratives from the 19th century, the novel enacts

jazz aesthetics to explore the multiple fragmentations and dislocations of African-American identity, as well as offer a site for the historic reclamation of these narratives. Unlike Ann Petry's "Solo on the Drums", which traces the internal thoughts of the player, Morrison creates a prose performance in which she views herself as a linguistic corollary to the jazz ensemble. Although the whole story is summarized in the opening paragraph, the novel's use of an unidentified narrator, incorporation of period details, frequent interchange between chapters devoted to different characters, incorporation of rhythmic language, and willingness to shift (without warning) between multiple temporalities imbues the text with a sense of improvisation¹²⁵ and historical layering. This self-conscious manipulation of the text allows Morrison to create new ways of "becoming" American without it being tied "to conveniently bound and silenced black bodies" (*Playing* 38). As she argues in *Playing in the Dark*, white interlocutors imbued black subjects with the ideological and social insecurities of the nation, creating "a master narrative that spoke *for* Africans and their descendants, or *of* them" (50). A challenge to the familiar constructs of these "American Africanisms" and the novel form itself, *Jazz* renders its characters as dynamic and in process. As each person's story is revealed and intertwined with one another, the reader, like the jazz audience, must decipher how the past is actively interfering with the present. This requires readers to participate in the act of narration. Rather than depending on the author to create a linear and objective view of the subject, Morrison forces her audience to constantly adjust

¹²⁵ As she mentions in a 1992 interview, "I was very conscious in writing *Jazz* of trying to blend that which is contrived and artificial with improvisation...I thought of myself as like the jazz musician: someone who practices and practices and practices in order to be able to invent and to make his art look effortless and graceful. I was always conscious of the constructed aspect of the writing process, and that art appears natural and elegant only as a result of constant practice and awareness of its formal structures" (81).

and readjust their perception of the characters to account for the physical and psychological fragmentations that have created the extended silences, affairs, acts of violence, and tentative reconciliations that shape the novel.

Morrison's presentation of time is not linear because, as a performative text, she does not want the structure to misrepresent how individuals grapple with history. The characteristics of jazz improvisation, or the melding of that which is known and unknown to both the reader and the characters themselves, allow her to create what she describes in a 1996 interview as "the continuous present":

The past for my characters, I believe, is—I was going to say intimate, but I don't mean intimate. Why don't we put it this way: I understand that in many African languages there is an infinite past, and very few, if any, verbs for the future, and a major string of verbs for the continuous present. So that notion of it always being now, even though it is past, is what I wanted to incorporate into the text, because the past is never something that you have to record, or go back to...It's a very living-in-the-moment, living in the now with the past, so that it's never—calculated; it's effortless. ("I Come" 130)

When the past infiltrates the everyday actions of the characters, they become living historical records. While it must appear "effortless" to the reader, this constant interplay between stories and perspectives does not suggest the creation of an infallible and stable record. Instead the reader becomes a witness to characters who are "living in the now with the past" and are constantly grappling with histories previously unrecognized or unspoken. This is particularly true of Joe and Violet Trace as they grapple with Joe's murder of Dorcas, his young mistress, and Violet's decision to storm her funeral to cut her face. Every aspect

of the novel reverberates from these acts, gradually revealing the physical and psychological dislocations that led to this outcome and the necessary, although painful, engagements with the past that eventually allow them to move forward.

These actions and the exploration of their origins capture what Nathaniel Mackey describes as black music's inherent "critique of social reality, a critique of social arrangements in which, because of racism, one finds oneself deprived of community and kinship, cut off" (234). A negotiation between the physical and the metaphysical, lived reality and transcendent experience, music attempts to narrate what Mackey discusses as "the phantom limb", or "a felt recovery" that "arises from a capacity for feeling that holds itself apart from numb contingency" (235). Although carefully integrated period details such as the 1917 riots in St. Louis and Harlem, and the general attitudes that characterized the Great Migration are incorporated into the text, all of Morrison's characters have, in various ways, been "deprived of community and kinship" or been temporarily "cut off" from the very histories that would allow them to reinvent the present and future. For characters such as Joe and Violet Trace, their misunderstanding of the past creates fragmentations, or silences and violence that they do not recognize as a continuous and shaping force in their lives. It is only after the novel addresses Golden Gray, a 19th century figure they have only a tertiary relationship to, that Joe and Violet are able to move beyond the "numb contingency" that has come to dominate their lives into a clearer understanding of the relationship between the past and present.

Many scholars have noted the fragmentation, cracks, fissures, and silences that permeate the novel, however they often fall into the habit of interpreting them as irreconcilable forms of 'cultural mourning', a mounting sense of double-consciousness, or

an evaluation of the losses and misunderstandings that accompany the movements of the Great Migration.¹²⁷ While this chapter acknowledges these factors as valuable to understanding these characters, I explore how Morrison's deployment of jazz aesthetics offers opportunities to both trace these dislocations and fragmentations and create spaces for important, although sometimes tenuous, recoveries of the self. By examining the influences of jazz aesthetics on the narrative voice and overall construction of the novel, I hope to establish how jazz both creates temporal compressions and forces the reader into a participatory act of narration. I will then focus on Joe and Violet Trace's frequent dislocations (both physically and emotionally), how they are recalled in the present, and the fragmentations of the self that hinder their control or agency over the past. Finally, I will turn to Morrison's explorations of the past and 19th century characters such as True Belle (Violet's grandmother), Wild, Henry Lestroy, and Golden Gray, arguing for these histories as painful, but important sites of reconciliation.

Silence and Violence: Jazz Aesthetics, Narrative Voice, and the Tentative

Reconciliations of Toni Morrison's *Jazz*

One of the primary sources of discussion surrounding Morrison's novel is the multiplicity of narrative voices and the unidentified or unidentifiable narrator of the text.¹²⁸ Although some critics have identified it as a human voice and others have argued for the city as the defining narrative voice¹²⁹, Morrison herself describes the narrative voice

¹²⁷ See Rubenstein, Roberta. "Singing the Blues/Reclaiming Jazz: Toni Morrison and Cultural Mourning." *Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature* 31.2 (1998): 147-63; Hardack, Richard. "'A Music Seeking Its Words': Double-Timing and Double Consciousness in Toni Morrison's *Jazz*." *Callaloo* 18.2 (1995): 451-71; Anne Paquet-Deyris. "Toni Morrison's 'Jazz' and the City." *African American Review* 35.2 (2001): 219-31.

¹²⁸ See Jane Lilienuki (2006) and Eusebio Rodrigues (1993)

¹²⁹ See Jeffrey J. Folks (1999) and Anne-Marie Paquet-Deyris (2001)

as a “talking book”. This complicates both the genre form in which she works and the jazz tradition from which it draws its influence. As she discusses:

The voice is the voice of a talking book...It sounds like a very erotic, sensual love song of a person who loves you...It's a book talking, but very few people read it like that...I deliberately restricted myself using an “I” that was only connected to the artifact of the book as an active participant in the invention of the story of the book...It's very strange, but I like it because it's risky. But jazz unsettles you...You're not in control. It was this assumption of control, the reader's control, the book's control—all of these had to be displaced, so no one's in control. (“Nobel Laureate” 95)

Borrowing from both literary tradition, jazz aesthetics, and oral tradition, Morrison's text attempts to unsettle the audience through its inability to be defined. The creativity of improvisation and the deliberate dissociation of the author from the text reveal the risk involved in trying to tell any story, even your own, in a way that captures the ‘whole’ truth. Like the intricacies of the break, which challenge 19th and 20th century conceptions of musical arrangement¹³⁰, Morrison develops a narrative structure that displaces the reader, or listeners, “assumption of control.” The novel is meant to be read as a highly individuated interplay between characters who are, like the jazz ensemble, in close association, but often unaware of their destination. Echoing Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s trope of the “talking book”¹³¹,

¹³⁰ See Leroi Jones (1963) chapter entitled “Primitive Jazz and Primitive Blues”, pgs-60-81, W.C. Handy's (1926) introduction to his blues anthology for 19th and early 20th century discussions of these modifications. For late 20th century examples see Josh Kun (2005) and Jeff Chang's (2005) discussion of the hip-hop “break” and its effect on contemporary musical culture.

¹³¹ As Gates describes, “The trope of the Talking Book is the ur-trope of the Anglo-American tradition. Bakhtin's metaphor of double-voiced discourse, figured most literally in representational sculptures of Esu and implied in the Signifying Monkey's' function as the rhetoric of a vernacular

the characters are engaged in “double-voiced discourse”, or a method of storytelling that challenges the persistent desire “to know what happened, who did it and why” (“The Art of Fiction” 81). She alters the novel form through oral and aural cues because it forces reader, both white and black, to contend with linear historiography and, in particular, its deployment as a vehicle for the continued misrepresentation of African-American communities. Rather than reducing her characters’ stories to a medium that frequently “fails to speak” (Gates 132) to individual, cultural, and historical specificity, the novel becomes an active intermediary in the construction of each individual narrative; as she discusses, “the jazz-like structure wasn’t a secondary thing for me—it was the *raison detre* of the book. The process of trial and error by which the narrator revealed the plot was as important and exciting to me as telling the story” (“The Art of Fiction” 81). A combination of careful craft and fluid storytelling, the novel freely shifts between temporalities, with every recollection making and remaking the present for the characters and the reader.

This adjusts how temporalities are performed and given association to one another because each account is mediated through various interpretations, accounts, and simulations of the past. African-American musical aesthetics and jazz in particular is interested in how the individual asserts their identity in relationship to the group, how they take their past and mold it into an assertion of the self in the present. As scholar Nick Young observes:

...jazz seems to say we ‘make it new’ only when we make it our own.

Negotiating between modern individuality and community, both in its actual

culture, comes to bear in black texts through the trope of the Talking Book. In the slave narratives discussed...making the white written text speak with a black voice is the initial mode of inscription of the metaphor of the double-voiced.” (131)

form and its ongoing history, jazz, and its birth parent, the blues, are in many ways the collective unconscious of African America—and by extension America—offering a firsthand account of risk, redemption, and yearning. No wonder, then, with its sound alone jazz provided both a cure and a cause for anxiety. (167)

The “anxiety” Young speaks of emerges from the indefinability of a sound that creates space for both the communication of deeply personal narratives and the reclamation of previously distorted representations of the “collective unconscious.”¹³² Simply by telling this story, Morrison is mimicking the ability of jazz to cause personal and public instability, as well as offer a space where it can be freely and forcefully reconciled.

Although the entirety of the narrative is presented in the very first paragraph of the novel, Morrison only uses this as an introduction to the structure and motivations of the performance that will follow. This displaces the readers desire to discover what will happen and instead redirects them towards the multiple and complex intersections of time that contributed to this occurrence. It is also important to note that sound, or the simple invocation of a cymbal, sets the tone for the narratives that are to come.

Sth, I know that woman. She used to live with a flock of birds on Lenox Avenue. Know her husband, too. He fell for an eighteen-year-old girl with one of those deepdown, spooky loves that made him so sad and happy he shot

¹³² Fred Moten’s assessment of the break and its relationship to freedom is useful here, “This disruption of the Enlightenment linguistic project is of fundamental importance since it allows a rearrangement of the relationship between notions of human freedom and notions of human essence. More specifically, the emergence from political, economic, and sexual objectification of the radical materiality and syntax that animates back performance indicates a freedom drive that is expressed always and everywhere throughout their graphic (re)production” (7).

her just to keep the feeling going. When the women, her name is Violet, went to the funeral to see the dead girl and to cut her dead face they threw her to the floor and out of the church. (*Jazz* 3)

This story of lust, love, violence, and revenge creates a unifying refrain, or shared experience to which the characters and the reader can always return. Morrison offers a simplified version of the tale, then opens the narrative up to the interpretation of all those involved. Rather than simply reciting the same notes in the same order each time, the jazz and blues of the Harlem Renaissance created spaces for the narratives, histories, and creativity of the individual. As Angela Davis points out: “The blues never remain fixed on one perspective, but rather different songs—sometimes the same song—explore experiences from various vantage points. Beneath the apparent simplicity and straightforwardness of the blues, complex visions...can always be uncovered” (Davis 49).¹³⁶ This refrain then becomes a riff, changing narrators, changing perspectives, delving into memory and eventually finding an open-ended resting place. This not only unsettles the reader, but builds a sense of anticipation. They are no longer passive recipients of a linear narrative, but must participate, along with the characters, in discovering what lead to these actions and how they are influenced by the unresolved presence of their past.

An ongoing and collective history that informs every character in the novel is the Great Migration and the massive exodus of African-Americans from rural Southern areas to the industrialized centers of the urban north. Longing to escape the debilitating forms of

¹³⁶ It should be noted that jazz and blues were often written of and discussed during this time as interchangeable terms. As jazz developed, it took on qualities distinct from the blues, but many scholars trace the first ‘jazz’ riff back to the “Memphis Blues” which was released by W.C. Handy in 1912.

racism that defined them in slavery and the worsening conditions of sharecropping, many African-Americans went North with a renewed sense of self-worth and hope. The city promised to improve their lives, however, it often also meant leaving behind one's family and the cultural and social histories that defined both the individual and their relationship to the African-American community.¹³⁷ The demands of urban life, the faced-paced, machine rhythms of industrial capitalism, and the promised, although often unfulfilled desires for economic and social freedom, all coalesced in the restless, enticing rhythms of jazz: As the narrator :

...I'm strong. Alone, yes, but top-notch and indestructible—like the city in 1926 when all the wars were over and there will never be another one...At last, at last, everything's ahead. The smart ones say so and the people listening to them and reading what they write agree: Here comes the new. Look out. There goes the sad stuff. The bad stuff. The things-nobody-could-help stuff. History is over, you all, everything's ahead at last. (7)

Fast-paced, rhythmical, and enticing, the concentrated fervor of the city is empowering, tempting people to forget what they once were and embrace the future, even if that future means being “alone, but top-notch”. All of the “sad stuff. The bad stuff. The things-nobody-could-help stuff” is presented as a relic of the past that has been eliminated in favor of a future that promises never to recoil. When Violet and Joe Trace arrived twenty years earlier, the first glimpse of the city, and the new identities it promised, is described as an

¹³⁷ For an account of the post-Civil War and pre-Migration conditions, see W.E.B. DuBois' text *Black Reconstruction* (1935). For details on the Great Migration itself, Isabel Wilkerson's *The Warmth of Other Suns* (2010), Alferdteen Harrison's collection of essays *Black Exodus* (1991), and James Smethurst's *The African American Roots of Modernism: From Reconstruction to the Harlem Renaissance* (2011).

act of love; “they stared out the windows for the first sight of the City that danced with them, proving already how much it loved them” (32). The city promises them a future without a past, a freedom from the fragmentations, longings, and desires that characterized them in the South. What Violet and Joe fail to realize is that history is never “over”; all of those years of dissociating themselves from the past have started to show “cracks”, or fault lines where the past intrudes on their behaviors in the present.

While Violet’s actions in the opening are shocking, the narrator reminds the reader that it was “way, way before that, before Joe ever laid eyes on the girl” (17) that she began to have instances of “public craziness” (22). Counter to the “snappy, determined girl” (23) who arrived full of optimism and energy, twenty years of living in the city, withholding her emotions, and longing for a future she can barely articulate cause Violet to develop “private cracks” or unreconciled histories that reduce her life to a repeated and endless “sequence of errands, lists of tasks” (15). Cut off from the family, communities, histories, and regions where her identity was formed, she searches for respite in daily tasks, or the routine immediacy of the present. However, this only makes her less capable of either acting or controlling her actions. As the narrator notes, for Violet and women like her there is “a space of nothing” that must be filled before, “the seep of rage...Or else, into a beat of time, and sideways under their breasts, slips a sorrow they don’t know where from” (16). The lack of memory, or a space that gives their daily tasks meaning creates a void, or a sense of self that eventually transforms into an unidentified yearning, rage, and/or sorrow. Exhausted by the daily tasks and miniscule details that serve to suppress her past, Violet simply sits down in the street and refuses to speak or move for several hours. This need for rest is transformed into a physically and emotionally debilitating silence. In another

instance, “although there was no way to prove it” (17), she tries to steal a baby from the front stoop of a neighborhood home. What was once “a panting, unmanageable craving” (107) for motherhood becomes a semi-conscious yearning, or desire that no longer recognizes its origins. As the narrator describes, these actions or lack of action reveal “cracks”, or spaces where history is either silenced or unknown:

I call them cracks because that is what they were. Not openings or breaks, but dark fissures in the globe light of the day. She wakes up in the morning and sees with perfect clarity a string of small, well-lit scenes...food things, work things; customers and acquaintances are encountered...But she does not see herself doing these things. She sees them being done. The globe light holds and bathes each scene, and it can be assumed that at the curve where the light stops is a solid foundation. In truth, there is no foundation at all, but alleyways, crevices one steps across all the time...Closely examined it shows seams, ill-glued cracks and weak places beyond which is anything. Anything at all. Sometimes when Violet isn't paying attention she stumbles onto these cracks, like the time when, instead of putting her left heel forward, she stepped back and folded her legs in order to sit in the street. (22-23)

Although Violet and many other women desperately search for a “solid foundation”, Morrison suggests that African-American history is one of fragments, of “alleyways, crevices one steps across all the time” in search of their past. Despite her ability to get things done, to engage in “a string of well-lit scenes” that make up her daily routines, Violet distances herself from the unknown origins of her silences, from the “dark fissures in the globe light of day” that might reveal “anything. Anything at all.” She ignores the vague, but

unsettling remembrances of her mother's suicide and her grandmother's endless stories of a "blond boy who left them all" (22). She recalls the moment she "had chosen Joe and refused to go home" (23), but cannot decipher how "all those miscarriages—two in the field, only one in the bed" (107) had caused her to steel herself against the past through silence in the present.

In fact, she dissociates herself from the past for so long she cannot reconcile the image of the woman sitting in the street with the woman she used to be or desires to become. As Richard Hardack observes, Morrison often creates "Characters who are split into observed and observing selves, into racial halves, into parts of lost familial and cultural wholes, lose conscious control of their bodies. As a result, they begin to observe themselves acting in an involuntary, and often expressly violent, manner" (453). Called Violet by some in the community after her outburst at the church, Violet is overwhelmed by the intangible distance between her mind and her actions. While she believes she is protecting Joe from the "craziness" (24) in her own head by never speaking of the past and barely acknowledging the present, the narrator notes how "Over time her silences annoyed her husband, then puzzle him, and finally depress him. He is married to a woman who speaks mainly to her birds. One of whom answers back: 'I love you'" (24).

"Or used to." (24) A subtle incorporation of call and response into the structure of the novel, this utterance introduces Joe's voice into the narrative ensemble¹³⁸ and signals

¹³⁸ This idea of the ensemble emerges, in part, from Fred Moten's (2003) explanation of black performance and its relationship to the construction of history: "...the emergence from political, economic, and sexual objectification of the radical materiality and syntax that animates black performances indicates a freedom drive that is expressed always and everywhere throughout their graphic (re)production...the temporal condensation and accelerations of the trajectory of black performances, which is to say black history, poses a real problem and a real chance for the philosophy of history...the animative materiality—the aesthetic, political, sexual, and racial force—

an new interaction between the audience and the storyteller. Unlike Violet who spends her days silent and in search of miniscule tasks to cope with the present, Joe is consumed with “remembering every detail of that October afternoon when he first met [Dorcas], from start to finish, over and over” (28). In an attempt to remember what it felt like to be with her, “to conjure up the dearness”, he can no longer remember how it felt to be any other way. This cognitive dissonance¹³⁹, or inability to make sense of the relationship between the events of his past and his feelings in the present trap Joe in an endless cycle of mourning. While “he recalls dates, of course, events, purchases, activities, even scenes” (29) of when he and Violet journeyed to the city, he cannot locate “what it felt like...He had struggled a long time with that loss, believed he had resigned himself to it, had come to terms with the fact that old age would be not remembering what things felt like” (29). Without feelings, Joe believes he will be reduced to language, or a rendering of the past that was inanimate and lacking in the necessary feeling to make it truly known. Therefore, he plays scenes with Dorcas over and over in his head, of moments when he could “tell his new love things he never told his wife. Like his search for his mother and his desire to find her, or at least receive a sign that told him she was his” (36). Being with Dorcas helps him recall not the words, but the feeling, the longing for a sense of genealogy that “would have been some combination of shame and pleasure, at least, and not the inside nothing he traveled with from then on”

of the ensemble of objects that we might call black performances...is a real problem and a real chance for the philosophy of human being...” (7-8).

¹³⁹ As Leon Festinger describes in his ground-breaking text, *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance* (1957), he describes how people desire consistencies in themselves and their beliefs. However, he notes, “people are not always successful in explaining away or rationalizing inconsistencies to themselves. For one reason or another, attempts to achieve consistency may fail...Under such circumstances—that is, in the presence of inconsistency—there is psychological discomfort” (2). For more on how this theory has evolved see also Eliot Aronson (1992); Justin Mills and Eddie Harmon-Jones (1999).

(37). Yet, like his wife, these early intimations of the past are only a temporary relief and a vague gesture. Their remembrances are always interrupted by the immediacy of the present, by the influence of the city that makes them believe in “their stronger, riskier selves” until they “forget what loving other people was like” (33).

It isn't until much later that Joe finally realizes the importance of his conversations with Dorcas and the reasons he killed her. More than desire or feeling, he notes how “I told her things I hadn't told myself. With her I was fresh, new again. Before I met her I'd changed into new seven times”. In a state of reinvention since birth, Joe describes his first transformation as the necessity of choosing his own last name because he had been told his family “disappeared without a trace”. (123) Morrison's reference to genealogy and the difficulty of tracing one's self back to an original source resonates in all of the other transformations Joe goes through in his life. His story begins with a loss and is then structured by a series of physical and emotional fragmentations, all of which were intended to create, like his name, a stable identity for himself and his family. He recalls learning how to hunt with Henry Lestroy and be comfortable and competent in the woods; leaving Vienna after a fire ravaged the town and forced him and Violet to move for work; farming land until the rent became too high, then buying land only to have it snatched away without repercussion; laying railway; moving from the South to the North, and from downtown to uptown; and being nearly beaten to death during the Harlem riots of 1917. This series of rapid transformations echoes the cultural, social, and economic narratives that were captured in the sounds and structures of jazz. As Duke Ellington describes, “jazz is simply an expression of an age, in music...a picture of the way people thought and felt; an expression of human reactions to the conditions under which they lived” (Askland 257).

Similar to the millions of African-Americans who made the journey from the rural South to the urban North, Joe is deeply affected by the constant cycle of dislocation, unsteady work, racial exploitation, and violence that characterized the period. Although Joe must replay their conversations over and over, eventually he begins to articulate how his past has inflected his behavior in the present:

Don't get me wrong. This wasn't Violet's fault. All of it's mine. All of it. I'll never get over what I did to that girl. Never. I changed once too often. Made myself new one time too many. You could say I've been a new Negro all my life. But all I lived through, all I seen, and not one of those changes prepared me for her. For Dorcas. (129)

By directly referencing the idea of the “New Negro” that permeated Harlem throughout the 1920s, Morrison gestures towards the spirit of the age and in particular how it was understood by working class African-Americans. Concerned that cultural forms such as the blues and jazz would simply perpetuate the stereotypes and hyper-sexualized tropes of African-Americans during the 19th century, many Harlem Renaissance writers seemed to believe “that the tortured past could be erased with rhetorical flourish and fiat, and the mere proclamation of ‘the new’” (McDowell 163).¹⁴⁰ Although Joe tries to change once again, Dorcas reminds him of his fragmentations, of his longing to know his mother, to

¹⁴⁰ While Harlem Renaissance figures such as Langston Hughes, Wallace Thurman, Zora Neale Hurston, Aaron Douglas, and Richard Bruce Nugent attempted to give working class African-Americans a voice within the movement, texts such as W.E.B. DuBois' “Criteria of Negro Art” (1926), Alain Locke's book *The New Negro* (1925), James Weldon Johnson's Preface to *The Book of American Negro Poetry* (1922), and journals such as *The Crisis* promoted representations of African-American culture that were considered more respectable, or affiliated with ‘high’ culture. See also Henry Louis Gates' “The Trope of a New Negro and the Reconstruction of the Image of the Black” (1988) for more on these debates during the period.

create a home, and to become a man. It is these dislocations, from himself and the past, that bring him, silent and depressed, to her doorstep.

While Violet and Joe are beginning to articulate the intimacies of their past¹⁴¹, Morrison's inclusion of Golden Gray, a 19th century character to whom they have tertiary, but no direct relationship to, points to the importance she places on the music as a vehicle for understanding the relationship between the past and present. Not simply confined to the individual narratives of the players, the jazz ensemble is encouraged to reinvent the past, to offer a new perspective on narratives widely known, but perhaps barely understood. Despite the fact that none of the characters can speak for themselves, music becomes a new and necessary form of historical mediation, a combination of that which is known and that which can only be imagined, or improvised. As the narrator discusses in the opening paragraph of Golden's chapter:

Risky, I'd say, trying to figure out anybody's state of mind. But worth it if you're like me—curious, inventive and well-informed. Joe acts like he knew all about what the old folks did to keep on going, but he couldn't have known much about True Belle, for example, because I doubt Violet ever talked about her grandmother—and never about her mother. So he didn't know. Neither do I, although it's not hard to imagine what it would have been like. (137)

Once again, Morrison creates a deliberate act of narrative instability, simultaneously reminding the reader that it is both "risky" to speak for the past, but "worth it" if you are

¹⁴¹ This can be seen in the above description of Joe's past and in the relationship that is being slowly developed between Alice and Violet. Although those conversations are not directly mentioned here, see Aoi Mori (1999) and Angelyn Mitchell (1998) for more on how their relationship creates a form of shared healing.

“curious, inventive, and well-informed.” When the narrators notes that “it’s not hard to imagine what it would have been like” it is because they are living conterminously with the material, psychological, emotional, and physical reifications of these discourses. The jazz aesthetic encourages the artist to develop their understanding of the past into their expression of identity in the present. For Morrison “the denotative and connotative blackness” that permeated 19th century psycho-social relations are still affecting not only the characters of her novel, but the world that surrounds her reader. The story of True Belle and Golden Gray reveal not only what “the old folks did to keep going”, but also explores what these Eurocentric presumptions of superiority do “to the mind, imagination, and behavior of masters” (*Playing* 12).

Or those who think they are masters. With a name that attests to both his appearance and the shadow of his mixed race, Golden Gray is chosen for the blessings of freedom “because after the pink birth skin disappeared along with the down on his head, his flesh was radiantly golden, and his floppy yellow curls covered his head and the lobes of his ears” (139). Kicked out of her father’s home in Virginia after the discovery of her pregnancy by one of his slaves, Vera Louis leaves for Baltimore and chooses to take True Belle with her, despite the fact that True Belle must leave her own family behind in the process¹⁴⁴. Obsessing over every detail of his education, his clothing, his hair, and his appearance, the two women raise Golden as a white man of status and privilege. This is until True Belle tells him of his origins and sets in motion his plan, at eighteen years old, “to

¹⁴⁴ Angelyn Mitchell’s article “‘Sth, I know that Woman’: History, Gender, and the South in Toni Morrison’s *Jazz*” does an excellent reading of the ways True Belle’s sexuality is “suppressed and subsumed by her role as a caregiver” (52), as well as the ways in which “the Black slave woman must deal with the issue of her deferred personal desires as well as with her subconscious hope for future fulfillment.”

find, then kill, if he was lucky, his father" (*Jazz* 143). A reverse migration of sorts, Golden returns to the South to discover the origins of his identity, and the promptly kill or silence them. Close to his destination, but fighting rain, he stops to secure his trunk and when doing so, spots "a naked berry-black woman". Startled by his presence, she turns to run, but knocks herself unconscious on a nearby tree. Significantly, his first interaction with race in the South is punctuated by the appearance of a black female body absent of speech or consciousness. While he is first convinced that she is "not a real woman but a 'vision'", he soon recognizes she is pregnant and, in fact, "something inside her is moving" (*Jazz* 145). Not only is the woman, who we come to find is Joe's mother, not considered "real" by Golden, his first instinct is to deny the humanity of both her and her child. Despite the fact that Golden is half-black, he identifies as white and is therefore terrified by the presence of a black woman who contains an unknown, or previously unexplored, identity. He is fearful "that she might regain consciousness" because then he might have to come into direct contact with that part of himself he so vehemently wishes to deny. If she awakes and becomes "something more than his own dark purpose" (*Jazz* 146), his freedom is compromised, or at least outwardly challenged. Up to this point "He thought there was only one kind—True Belle's kind. Black and nothing. Like Henry LesTroy. Like the filthy woman snoring on the cot. But there was another kind—like himself" (149). Golden understands blackness as an empty discursive signifier, or a space where "Black and nothing" are interchangeable descriptions.

Cut off from his father and, in many ways, from his own cultural and racial identity, Golden attempts to destroy the past. However, as Morrison's demonstrates in her construction of his opinions about race and reactions to the black body, there are profound

consequences when one chooses to actively deny history a place in the present. For her, jazz insists on exploring these untold narratives of the self and the physical and/or emotional fragmentations that accompany them. As Nathaniel Mackey discusses, black music has the capacity to create:

...a felt recovery, a felt advance beyond severance and limitation that contends with and questions conventional reality, that is a feeling for what is not there that reaches beyond as it calls into question what is. Music as a phantom limb arises from a capacity for feelings that holds itself apart from numb contingency. The phantom limb haunts or critiques a condition in which feeling, consciousness itself, would seem to have been cut off. (235)

The jazz and musical-linguistic aesthetic of the novel draws the past into the present, activating history so as to create not only a reflection on current discourse, but also on those physical fragmentations and dislocations that create “a condition in which feeling, consciousness itself, would seem to be cut off.” When Golden sits down in his father’s cabin for the first time, neither he nor the audience can dissociate him from his past and the genealogies that throw into doubt his sense of “conventional reality”:

Only now, he thought, now that I know I have a father, do I feel his absence, the place where he should have been and was not. Before, I thought everyone was one-armed, like me. Now I feel the surgery. The crunch of bone when sundered, the sliced flesh and tubes of blood cut through, shocking the bloodrum and disturbing the nerves. They dangle and writhe. Singing pain. Waking me with the sound of itself, thrumming so when I sleep so deeply it strangles my dreams away...And no, I’m not angry. I don’t need the arm. But I

do need to know what it could have been like to have had it. It's a phantom I have to behold and be held by, in whatever crevices it lies, under whatever branch....When I find it, will it wave to me? Gesture, beckon me to come along? Or will it even know who or what I am? It doesn't matter. I will locate it so the severed part can remember the snatch, the slice of disfigurement. Perhaps then the arm will no longer be phantom, but will take its own shape, grow its own muscle and bone, and its blood will pump from the loud singing that has found the purpose of its serenade. (158-159)

The concept of the talking book and the musical-linguistic structures of the novel thrust Golden into a direct conversation with a past experienced, felt, suffered, communicated, and tenuously recovered through music. Golden cries because for the first time he is remembering the pain of his disfigurement, the "singing pain" that has done all it can "to strangle my dream away." The sound creates a visceral remembrance, a gesture towards the parts of the self that continue to "dangle and writhe" despite their temporal distance from the actual site of dismemberment. Golden is not upset at having lost that part of himself, but he does long "to know what it could have been like to have had it." While Morrison doesn't suggest that any full recover of the self is possible, she does note the necessity of locating the past, or that part of the self that has been lost so it "can remember the snatch, the slice of disfigurement." One of the few cultural forms not controlled by the ideologies and racisms of white society during the 19th century, music offers a way to locate what Nathaniel Mackey describes as "the realm of the orphan", or those spaces in which African-American are "severed from the presence to which it refers and which presumably gave it birth" (233). Golden offers a glimpse into the genealogy we all share, into the

historical “crevices” or phantoms that we all must “behold and beheld by” (233) before the tenuous process of healing can occur. For it is only after this process of painful remembrance that “the arm will no longer be phantom, but will take its own shape, grow its own muscle and bone, and its blood will pump from the loud singing that has found the purpose of its serenade.” (*Jazz* 159). Rather than suppressing their past or succumbing to the spirit of modernity that encourages one to forget “The bad stuff. The things-nobody-could- help stuff” (*Jazz* 7), Violet and Joe must locate, through their own creative reinterpretation of the past, locate the “purpose of its serenade”, or its resonance in the present.

Although Golden’s story is distant from their own, it is only after it is relayed that the narrative begins to arc towards the denouement, or tentative resolution of its storylines. Announced in by the “sweetheart weather” of early spring, the final chapter indicates a time of transformation. Joe and Violet begin to clearly articulate the desires that led to the perpetual states of mourning and visceral silences that were cutting them off from not only the past, but their own sense of identity. When Felice, Dorcas’ best friend, and one of the first people they invite back into their home, comes to visit, she notes how the small gestures seem to indicate more profound alterations in attitude:

Later on Mrs. Trace brought him a plate of old-people food: vegetable stuff with rice and the cornbread right on top. He said ‘Thank you, baby. Take half for yourself.’ Something about the way he said it. As though he appreciated it...And when he leaves the room and walks past his wife, he touches her. Sometimes on the head. Sometimes just a pat on the shoulder. (207)

Despite the banality of these moments, of serving food to one another or walking past each other in the apartment, there is a subtle intonation of love that moves beyond desire. While it is always a tenuous recovery and still “risky” as the narrator notes earlier, to investigate the past, as Morrison notes “history should not become a straight jacket, which overwhelms and binds, neither should it be forgotten. One must critique it, test it, confront it, and understand it in order to achieve a freedom that is more than license, to achieve true, adult agency” (“The Art of Fiction” 82). In one of the final conversations between Violet and Felice, Violet implores Felice to consider how she can shape the present, or make the world into something she acts on and within, instead of simply against or in response to:

“Don’t you want [the world] to be something more than what it is?”

‘What’s the point? I can’t change it.’

‘That’s the point. If you don’t, it will change you and it will be your fault cause you let it. I let it. And messed up my life.’

‘Messed it up how?’

‘Forgot it.’

‘Forgot?’

‘Forgot it was mine. My life. I just ran up and down the streets wishing I was somebody else.’ (208)

Trapped by her desire for children, her misunderstanding of Joe, the stories of Golden Gray, and of the suicide of her mother, Violet simply ran around “wishing [she] was somebody else” (209). In trying to forget her past, she lost her agency, or her ability to make the world “into something more than what it is.” While it took her a lifetime to understand this notion

of agency, Violet encourages Felice to think of it now, to explore her past as a way of envisioning a new future for herself and others later. It took coming to the city to realize that she had “another you inside that isn’t anything like you” (208) and it took even longer to understand the necessity to confront and reconcile that past self with the longings of the desires and emotions being perpetuated in the present.

Although many scholars have turned to the final lines of the novel as definitive proof of the novel’s attempt to create interactions with the audience and further promote a jazz aesthetic, what is often overlooked is how the paragraphs immediately before carry within them a moving description of love and the often violent painful, difficult, and ennobling journey of two people that connects the reader not only to these characters, but themselves. Like the jazz musician, there is an effort to make that which is difficult appear as a natural extension of the self. These interactions, although simple, point to something much larger, something Morrison can only denote through the italicized voice of the narrator, who Morrison has already indicated in the voice of ‘a talking book’ or a jazz ensemble.

But there is another part, not so secret. The part that touches fingers when one passes the cup and saucer to the other. That part that closes her neckline snap while waiting for the trolley; and brushes lint from his blue serge suit when they come out of the movie house into the sunlight. I envy them their public love. I myself have only known it in secret, shared it in secret and longed, aw longed to show it—to be able to say out loud what they have no need to say at all: *That I have loved you, surrendered my whole self reckless to you and nobody else. That I want you to love me back and show it to me. That I*

love the way you hold me, how close you let me be to you. I like your fingers on and on, lifting, turning. I have watched your face for a long time now, and missed your eyes when you went away from me. Talking to you and hearing you answer—that's the kick. (229)

The subtlety of their interactions or their displays of “public love” in many ways disguise that which we all feel, but are often unable to articulate. It is only through the ensembles effort to show us, to communicate through action, that the narrator can begin to describe the emotions hidden by layers of discourse and suppressions of the past. Yes, when Morrison asks the reader to “look, look. Look where your hands are now” in the final line she is imploring the reader to understand their complicity in the development of the narrative, but more profoundly, she asks us to discover the heart of jazz, the movements between time, space, desire, hate, pain, and love that eventually find a resting place in the simplest of tasks; “*Talking to you and hearing you answer—that's the kick.*”

Conclusion

As scholars such as David Havery, Etienne Balibar, and Immanuel Wallerstein discuss in their explorations of “neoliberalism” and the rise of free market economies all over the world, there was a necessity for a unifying theory of the market and in particular one that could ignore issues of race, class, and gender through the ideologies of individualism and entrepreneurship. As Balibar and Wallerstein describe:

The very identity of the actors depends upon the process of formation and the maintenance of hegemony. Thus the modern bourgeoisie formed itself into a class that managed the proletariat, after having been a class that managed

the peasantry: it had to acquire political skills and a 'self-consciousness' which anticipated the way that resistance to it would be expressed and which transformed itself with the nature of that resistance. The universalism of the dominant ideology is therefore rooted at a much deeper level than the world expansion of capital and even than the need to procure common rules of action for all those who manage that expansion. It is rooted in the need to construct, in spite of the antagonism between them, an ideological 'world' shared by exploiters and exploited alike. (4)

By writing a narrative of how the other was constructed in the 19th century, resonated in the 1920s, and is being actively formulated in the late 20th century, Morrison also hopes to draw lines of continuity between the past and the development of global systems of capitalism. While the book is not a direct critique of capitalist systems, what it gestures towards is the long-standing social and political philosophies of race that allowed for the erasure of African-American voices and the simultaneous construction of an ideology that is "shared by exploiters and exploited alike". Hip-hop would emerge in the mist of this social, political, and economic rift, a record of both the ideologies that led to the aggressive "withdrawal of the state from social provision" and the championing of "strong private property rights, free markets, and free trades" (Harvey 2-3). As will be seen in the next chapter, this intense growth in the technological information and the dissemination of popular culture across a variety of mediums and borders caused a specific sort of anxiety about the relationship between the past and the present. While hip-hop historiographers have primarily focused on the consequences of these neoliberal ideologies, in particular Reaganomics, deindustrialization, and white flight, it is my intention that more texts such

as Morrison's should be evaluated for their specific connection to histories far beyond those bounds. As will be seen in Colson Whitehead's novel *Sag Harbor* (2009), hip-hop is not simply a bi-product of its specific cultural and political history, but is influenced by literary, oral, and musical practices that stretch across the 20th century.

Chapter 6

“Sampling in Colson Whitehead’s *Sag Harbor*: The Use of Hip-Hop Aesthetics in Contemporary Black Fiction”

While hip-hop is now addressed in universities across the nation, it took nearly thirty years after the movement began for scholars to focus exclusively on the development and motivations of this globally influential art form. Offering the first full-length study of the subject, Tricia Rose’s *Black Noise* (1994) outlines the importance, and difficulty, of discussing hip-hop’s historiography and its relationship to black aesthetic practice across the twentieth century. Despite Rose’s argument that there must be “a necessary tension between the historical specificity of hip hop’s emergence and the points of continuity between hip hop and several Afrodiasporic forms, traditions, and practices” (Rose 25), many hip-hop scholars have interpreted the culture as an aesthetic reaction to Reaganomics, white flight, deindustrialization, and urban decay.¹⁴⁷ Robert Jensen, who curated a retrospective on the Bronx neighborhood in 1979, described the now famous birthplace of hip-hop as “a spectacular set of ruins, mythical wasteland, an infectious disease...a condition of poverty and social collapse, more than a geographical place” (Jensen 13). For Jensen and many in media and politics, the Bronx startling decay did become “more than a geographical place”; it became a justification for government wide budget cuts and fodder for increasingly dangerous and widely circulated stereotypes.¹⁴⁸ Not only did it reduce residents to the features of their neighborhood and their art to either

¹⁴⁷ See Marc Anthony Neal (1999); S. Craig Watkins (2005); Nelson George (1998); Houston A. Baker (1989); Adam Bradley (2009); Murray Forman (2002) for more texts that embrace this narrative.

¹⁴⁸ See Maurice A. Pierre (1991) and Otis B. Grant (2008) for discussions of Reaganomics and its effects on lower and middle class African-American families. See Tricia Rose (1994), pgs. 27-34 for information on the media portrayal of these neighborhoods.

reactions to or rebellions against those socioeconomic conditions¹⁴⁹, it also forced an entire generation of young black men and women to contend with the real or imagined boundaries of the 'ghetto.' Regardless of one's class or personal experiences, popular representations of African-American subjectivity relied heavily on "terms like *nihilistic*, *dysfunctional*, and *pathological*" (Kelley 16) in their descriptions of black urban environments and culture. The problem with these singular proscriptions of identity, as scholar Robin Kelley goes on to describe, is that "interpreters unwittingly reduce their subjects to cardboard typologies who fit neatly into their definition of the 'underclass' and render invisible wide array of complex cultural forms and practices" (17). A combination of sociologically reductive proscriptions and the machinations of consumer culture that played to the fantasies of white consumers¹⁵⁰, these discourses obscured the aesthetic and cultural histories of hip-hop, as well as their profound impact on a vast and varied number of African-American constituencies.

¹⁴⁹ As Marc Anthony Neale (1999) notes, "What emerged in the shadows of many of these developments was a distinct African-American youth culture whose basic sentiments were often incompatible with mainstream African-American leadership and mainstream culture in general. In its worst case, it was a culture personified by gang turf wars over the control of the crack-cocaine industry, a culture described by Michael Eric Dyson as 'ghettocentric juvenocracy' where economic rule and illegal tyranny is exercised by a cadre of young African-American males over a significant portion of the black urban landscape...At the more positive end of the spectrum a distinct discourse of African-American youth, with obvious regional variations, emerged to narrate, critique, challenge, and deconstruct the realities of postindustrial life" (134-135). See also S. Craig Watkins' (2005) and Nelson George's (1998) for similar descriptions of hip-hop's emergence and its relationship to consumer culture.

¹⁵⁰ As Paul Gilroy describes in his book *Small Acts* (1993), "...the basic interest in the marketing and commodification of objects and processes that resist transmutation into passive saleable items regularly requires the traffickers in black culture to deny that their chosen commodity has any political dimensions at all. Black cultures can be marketed to blacks in this bland, anodyne form but the anti-political approach is even stronger where the signs of blackness have been specifically packaged in order to cross over to white consumers, many of whom take pleasure in the transgression and dangerousness which these once forbidden commodities express, without discovering a similar enthusiasm for either the company of real live black people or the history of their struggles against slavery, for citizenship and towards personal and social autonomy" (3-4).

For writers such as Colson Whitehead and what Trey Ellis describes as “the critical mass of college graduates who were children of college graduates themselves” (Ellis 237), hip-hop offered both a cause and a cure for these discourses of misrepresentation and inauthenticity. While the commodification of the music and its relationship to inner cities dominated narratives in public discourse, the aesthetics of the music itself revealed a generation of artists who valued cultural hybridity as a form of contemporary identity politics. With the invention of turntables, hip-hop deejays made were able to create entire songs out of fragments from any musical genre or time period. This practice of historical layering, which draws together seemingly dissonant sounds, offered a model for contemporary subjectivity, particularly for those young men and women who felt they did not fit into the popular representations of the black or white world. In addition to discussions of locality and practices of signification, Colson Whitehead’s *Sag Harbor* (2009) transforms the technological strategies that define deejaying practice into a narrative of Benji, his friends, and their struggle to find out what it means to be “black boys with beach houses” (Whitehead 72). A clever comingling of adolescent angst and references to familiar historical figures, popular music, radio, television, fashion, dancing, and trends, the novel presents hip-hop as an analogy for the myriad influences, both past and present, that combine to create our sense of self in the modern world. Narrated during 1985, a time when hip-hop was entering into consumer culture and the national imagination, the novel draws subtle, but powerful associations between this burgeoning cultural expression and Benji’s search for identity. Through the radio and cassette player, which distances his subjects from the origins of the music, Whitehead describes the difficulty of reconciling

one's identity through the competing and often contradictory voices of consumer culture.

As George Lipsitz notes:

The very same media that trivialize and distort culture, that turn art into commodities, and that obscure the origins and intentions of artists also provide meaningful connection to our own pasts and the pasts of others. But they do so indirectly, constrained by the nonlinear biases of the electronic media as well as by a commercial matrix hostile to the kinds of empathy, inquiry, and analysis basic to historical thinking. (5)

While this constant interplay between commercial obfuscation and powerful narratives of cultural and aesthetic heritage can offer meaningful insights into one's identity, it forces hip-hop artists and their audiences to do so "indirectly" and in contention with mass media's "nonlinear" biases. Unwilling to acknowledge the inter-racial environments that confine identity to locality, the long history of aesthetic practices that contribute to signifying, or the intra-racial practices that have created several familiar, although often reductive, images of "authentic" black identity, consumer culture lacks the necessary forms of "empathy" and "inquiry" necessary to an understanding of contemporary African-American culture. Cognizant of both the connections these deejays offer to the past and the machinations of consumer culture that obscure it, Whitehead incorporates both the aesthetics of hip-hop and critiques of those inter- and intra-racial discourses that surrounded its dissemination and reception. Working both within and against hip-hop's conventional definitions, Whitehead utilizes the socioeconomic and physical localities of Benji and his friends as a way to dismantle images of young, black men that have often been conflated with descriptions of decaying and dysfunctional urban environments. Given

common binaries between ghetto existence and reactionary discourse to postindustrial life dominating current hip-hop historiography, Whitehead's novel offers a valuable case study in literary hip-hop aesthetics and their ability to construct identities that move betwixt and between these dichotomies. In addition, because Benji and his friends are African-American, middle-class, and mostly unaffiliated with the scenes of ghetto life reproduced within hip-hop, they must not only negotiate the current representations of what it means to be "authentically" black, but are also forced to process how intra-racial concepts of previous historical generations ("Militant", "Street", "Bootstrapping Striver", "Proud Pillar") will effect their eventual maturation. Whether integrating deejaying practices to reconsider the hundred-year-old idea of double-consciousness and the history of signification, or troubling locality through the integration of urban and suburban environments, the novel questions the delimited genealogical histories of hip-hop and how they are represented in popular culture. Through an exploration of the aesthetics of sampling and mixing, the restrictive dialogues of locality, a parody of signification, and a critique of the intra-racial standards for creating an "authentic" African-American identity, the novel not only reveals the continued relationship between literary and musical cultures, but offers a new model for understanding the flaws of current hip-hop historiography.

Colson Whitehead, Hip-Hop's Technical Innovations, and the Aesthetics of Deejaying

Despite the multiple ways hip-hop aesthetics challenge linear historical narrative, the roots of sampling, and deejaying more generally, can be traced back to Jamaica and the building of competitive sound systems throughout the 1960's. Although Kool Herc, who moved from Jamaica to the United States at the age of 11, was the first artist to isolate and loop the break, the Jamaican practices of manipulating sound through analog boxes and developing

dubs laid the groundwork for the first deejays.¹⁵¹ Often B-sides on commercial records, dubs, or the instrumental track of any given song, “moved the music forward” (Kun 127) by allowing artists to integrate their creativity in the present into the nexus of previously recorded sound. Called ‘versioning’ by many early pioneers, dubs presented originality from variation and personality rather than sound alone. As scholar Josh Kun points out, “no version was less original than the original: no version was less original than any other. In fact, originality was judged on how good any one version could be, if it was better than the version that came before it. Versioning—copying, replicating, reproducing—always made something new, always moved the music forward” (Kun 127).

While this ability to create several different interpretations of a song or add variation to any given song would continue to play a major part in the evolution of modern deejaying techniques, the focal point of early hip-hop culture came in the form of the record player, or phonograph. Invented in 1877 and popularized in the 1920’s and 30’s, the phonograph was originally intended to be a technology that emitted prerecorded sound. It essentially allowed people the opportunity to listen to the same song, in the same way, time and time again, and without interruption if they so chose. However, at the early block parties of deejaying pioneer Kool Herc, he began to notice that the crowd was constantly anticipating and invigorated by the ‘breaks’, or instrumental sections, of the songs. According to a 1989 interview with Herc, instead of forcing the audience to wait for the

¹⁵¹ See Jeff Chang (2005), pgs. 21-41 for more on the tradition of emceeing and sound system development in Jamaica. As he notes in his description of sound system pioneer Lee “Scratch” Perry, “Behind a cheap four-track mixing desk, which by the standards of the time was hopelessly outdated, Perry whirled and bopped and twiddled the knobs, imbuing the records with wild crashes of echo, gravity-defying phasing, and frequency-shredding equalization...Melodies became fragments, fragments became signs, and the whole thing swirled like a hurricane” (29).

brief, but invigorating moments of sound, “I cut off all anticipation and played the beats. I’d find out where the break in the record was at and prolong it and people would love it” (Davey D). In simply taking the breaks or sections of songs that the crowd responded to and creating entirely new interpretations out of fragments of previously recorded songs, early hip-hop deejays were developing one the core ideas that still exists in hip-hop today: “Records were not inviolate; songs did not need to be played from start to finish. A turntable therefore was not simply a playback device but a means for manipulating sound” (Katz 16). As an object for playback and a means of amalgamation, the phonograph embraced two contradictory states of being, one that projects a voice previously recorded and another that reflected the deejays ability to create something new in the moment.

While Whitehead’s novel is a combination of references that range from Dungeons and Dragons to National Lampoon and James Bond, an early scene exemplifies the novel’s dedication to deejaying aesthetics as a method for both remembering and renarrating the past. Set during the annual drive out to Sag Harbor, a vacation community comprised primarily of upper and middle-class black families, Benji reflects on the list of “Famous Black People I had never heard of” and his inability to ask about figures such as W.E.B. DuBois for fear of reprimand from the adults around him. Although he knew, “by some secret measure that it was a disgrace that I didn’t know who they were, these people who struggled and suffered for every last comfort I enjoyed” (17), figures such as DuBois, Marcus Garvey, and Toussaint L’Ouverture are not part of his immediate experience as a fifteen-year-old boy in the 1980’s. They do not inform his sense of identity, although he somewhat humorously remarks on the expectation that they should. Reflecting on how he would later read DuBois in college and be “blown away” by his essay on double-

consciousness, Benji goes on to quote from DuBois' famous passage from *The Souls of Black Folks*:

It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness—an American, a Negro; two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. The history of the American Negro is the history of strife,—this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. (Whitehead 18)

Incorporating the exact language of the past into the present narrative supports a creative reinterpretation of DuBois' text. Benji recalls the concept of double-consciousness, but reinvents it as an analogy for his story of growing up in postmodern America. A rapid movement between three distinct time periods, DuBois' voice connects the reader to turn of the century American culture and politics, Benji's experiences in college, and how those experiences informed his understanding of driving to Sag Harbor several years earlier. This layering of texts and meanings, like the deejays turntables, removes the teleological boundaries between the past, present, and future, allowing Whitehead to develop new images of identity through the innovative aesthetics of hip-hop. As scholar Richard Shur observes:

Hip-hop emphasizes and calls attention to its layered nature. The aesthetic code of hip-hop does not seek to render invisible layers of samples, sounds, references, images, and metaphors. Rather, it aims to create a collage in

which the sampled texts augment and deepen the song/book/art's meaning to those who can decode the layers (207).

It is not simply the use of many references, but how they are reconstructed so as to “augment and deepen” the meaning for the reader or listener. Even as Whitehead pulls from a variety of sources, he must choose fragments of sound and language that grant the reader insights into his own adolescent confusion. Seamlessly transitioning from the quote by DuBois back into the car ride out. Benji reflects on how, “Driving with my father, it was potholes of double-consciousness the whole way” (18). By creating a correlation between the only two radio stations his father would listen to (Afrocentric Talk Radio or Easy Listening) and DuBois’ famous passage, Whitehead invites his reader to decipher to relationship between DuBois and the contemporary context of the novel. Benji must constantly contend with two contradictory representations of the self in postmodern society, but this “sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others” is more aptly reimagined through the voices of Karen Carpenter and the speeches of contemporary African-American political and social activists. No longer directly related to the relationship between the white world and African-Americans, double-consciousness is thrust into a discussion of inter- and intra-racial dynamics, as well as the ever-growing influence of radio and consumer culture. The radio not only becomes an analogy for DuBois’ ideas, but reflects hip-hop’s pattern of “creating something new, and creating it in the moment” (Katz 60). Through the exact replication of sound bites on the radio and their position within one page of one another, Whitehead demonstrates both how Benji’s identity is being defined by vastly different representations of American identity.

Such a feeling's coming over me
 There is wonder in most everything I see
 Not a cloud in the sky
 Got the sun in my eyes
 And I won't be surprised if it's a dream
 Everything I want the world to be
 Is now coming true especially for me
 And the reason is clear
 It's because you are here
 You're the nearest thing to heaven that I've seen
 -Karen Carpenter

What I want to know is
 When are we going to have our day of justice
 These white people think they can kill us in our homes
 Can't walk down the street
 Without some cracker with a baseball bat
 Trying to murder us
 Murder our children, our future
 When are we going to have our day?
 -Afrocentric Talk Radio
 (Whitehead 19-20)

A space where the ephemeral joys of love and wonder lust are juxtaposed with the call for freedom from systems of violence and white supremacy, the backseat of Benji's car becomes a seemingly innocuous shift between two voices, neither of which accurately captures his sense of self in the present. In his "longing to attain self-conscious manhood" (18), Benji must contend with both the "deep dunes of whiteness" (19) in Karen Carpenter's voice and the polarizing racial politics of the 1980's that conflate blackness with urban experience. Despite his father's muttering that the points made about "police brutality, crummy schools, the mechanistic cruelty of city hall" were "just common sense" (20), Benji goes to private school and has little connection to the social and economic injustices experienced by African-Americans in urban environments. Dissociated from either experiences in which "everything I want the world to be/ Is now coming true especially for me" (18), or attacks from "These white people who think they can kill us in our homes" (19), Benji feels insecure in his identity, in how he should actually present himself to the world. As he comments, "Is it any wonder my dreams were troubled? Ease

and disquiet weaved in and out of reception, chasing each other down, two signals too weak to be heard for more than a few moments.” In the rapid pace of American life and the even quicker vacillation between radio stations by his father, Benji cannot find associations between his own experiences and the representations “chasing each other down” on the radio. Just as deejaying allows for unrelated and previously recorded fragments to create a unified narrative, Whitehead’s novel integrates multiple voices to gesture towards the complications of Benji’s identity. In creatively reinterpreting the aesthetics of deejaying, Whitehead makes apparent what hip-hop artists and fans already knew; the way the story is told is just as important as its component parts. Each voice is shown in exact replication; it is Whitehead’s ability to reimagine identity through the reconstruction of those voices that challenges the monolithic narratives of the radio and updates DuBois’ theory to reflect the contemporary moment. Benji’s double-consciousness is a question of inter- and intra-racial politics, of technologies that brings disparate voices into direct conversation, of class and their associations with modern conceptions of race. These interspersed voices unravel the “layered nature” of hip-hop culture, the hip-hop generation, and their methods of engaging with the past even as they recreate it and themselves in the present.

Reimagining the aesthetics of sampling and mixing through the radio also allows Whitehead to address the literal and metaphoric distance technology places between the sounds being emitted and the listener, who could be located anywhere. As scholar Edward Comentale discusses in his book *Sweet Air: Modernism, Regionalism, and American Popular Song*:

Unlike a journal or a newspaper, [radio] does not easily lend itself to a seemingly rational exchange of ideas and arguments; rather, it emits—in real

time—a series of shifting, overlapping currents of public sentiment, forging, in its own rushed and contradictory ways, a dynamic public of distracted listeners. As disembodied emotion, as feeling from afar, it does not so much inform its audience, but charges and shapes it, amplifying or dampening its affective potentials, re-animating each body as it goes about its common chores and rituals within an abstract whole. (104)

Forced to engage with the “disembodied” sounds of vastly different cultural experiences and aesthetic traditions, Benji understands (in a vague way) that his identity as a young, black man is being defined by voices beyond his control and only partially in his grasp. Offering only a fragmented understanding of the relationship between “overlapping currents of public sentiment”, the radio is a conduit for half-articulated, rapidly shifting, and discursively powerful associations between people and localities. Reinvented as it is recollected, this scene contributes to a greater understanding of the relationship between these competing voices and his adolescent development.

Discourses of Locality, Hip-Hop Aesthetics, and the Reinvention of Hip-Hop Historiography

While Benji’s drive out to Sag Harbor and his interactions with the radio give the reader a sense of his individual struggles with identity and contemporary forms of technology, the novel is also concerned with how locality comes to define not only Benji, but his friends as well. Shifting from the specificities of deejaying to the cultural practices that come to define the hip-hop movement more generally, Whitehead narrates space as sites of both literal and metaphoric exchange. As Adam Mansbach describes in his essay “On LitHop”:

Hip-hop introduces a specific set of interplay in revealing and obscuring the layers of the collage, takes a specific kind of pleasure in the mash-up refreaking of technologies and texts, understands history as something to backspin and cut up and cover with fingerprints in a particular kind of way. (Mansbach 93)

Reflecting the aesthetics of breakdancers, emcees, deejays, and graffiti artists, the novel implements references and knowledge from a variety of sources to create alternative representations of the self and the past. This implementation of an aesthetic that resists linear narrative, or focuses on “history as something to backspin and cut up and cover with fingerprints” allows Whitehead to create locations that are not only defined by their physical parameters, but also by the discourses of historiographers, media, and consumer culture. Focused on the multiplicity of meaning and the fluidity of historical narrative, Whitehead’s geographic interplay between New York City and the suburban beach community of Sag Harbor points to “a specific kind of pleasure” that emerges when one has the freedom to define themselves through contradictory and seemingly unrelated cultural localities or artifacts. As Murray Forman discusses in his analysis of the relationship between space and hip-hop:

The links between ghetto or inner-city spaces and rap are frequently drawn without significant interrogation of the discursively produced value systems that always influence our social perceptions of these spaces. In many earlier cases, the ostensibly ‘raw’ reality of hip-hop’s formative spaces is valorized and romanticized, creating misperceptions that position its cultural

expressions as the apparently organic product of a particular sociospatial milieu. (xx)

Through the juxtaposition of Sag Harbor and New York City, Whitehead gestures towards hip-hop culture as an expression that mediates narratives of the city and the suburbs, of prison and escape, of inner city and upper-middle class culture. Attending different schools and living in different areas, Benji and his friends have a wide range of experiences living in the city, none of which can be uniformly defined or confined to the post-industrial complexities of the inner city. Influenced by the radio, the increased dissemination of information through television media¹⁵², policies of benign neglect¹⁵³, and a consumer culture where “advertisers geared newspaper articles and television broadcasts towards the purchasing power of urban buyers” (Rose 29), the group molds their identities around competing and often contradictory registers.¹⁵⁴ Far from interpreting Sag Harbor as a site

¹⁵² As Tricia Rose discusses “urban renewal and relocation efforts not only dispersed central city populations to the suburbs, but also they replaced the commerce of the street with the needs of the metropolitan market. Advertisers geared newspaper articles and television broadcasts toward the purchasing power of suburban buyers, creating a dual ‘crisis of representation’ in terms of whose lives and images were represented physically and got represented in the corridors of power” (929).

¹⁵³ According to the International Encyclopedia of Social Sciences, “The concept of benign neglect was coined by the late Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan (D-NY) in a January 1970 memo to President Richard M. Nixon while he served as the latter’s Urban Affairs counselor. The widely circulated memo, which was leaked to the press in March of that same year, read: “The time may have come when the issue of race could benefit from a period of ‘benign neglect.’” At that historical juncture, Moynihan declared, Americans needed “a period in which Negro progress” continued and “racial rhetoric” faded. Moynihan believed that the antipoverty programs of the “Great Society” of the 1960s had failed miserably, not only because they had attempted to use money alone to solve the nation’s inability to properly educate the African American poor but also because they did not raise issues in reference to the viability of integration as a solution to U.S. racial problems.” (283)

¹⁵⁴ As Robin D.G. Kelley discusses in his book *Yo Mama’s Dysfunctional*, “From the outset, rap music embraced a variety of styles and cultural forms, from reggae and salsa to heavy metal and jazz. Hip Hop’s hybridity reflected, in part, the increasingly international character of America’s inner cities resulting from immigration, demographic change, and new forms of information, as well as the inventive employment of technology in creating rap music” (39).

of utopic escape, Benji actually characterizes being “out” as a fluctuation between two ideas that were often difficult to reconcile:

There was also the language of prison in there, in how long are you out for. Time on the East End was furlough, a day pass, a brief visit with the old faces and names before the inevitable moment when you were locked up again. That hard time defined the majority of our days. You did something wrong, why else would such a thing like the city happen to you. For a couple of weeks each year we habitual offenders got together and got up to no good before the handcuffs pinched our wrists again. Earlier, I described Sag as a kind of trap, but the place also attracted the language of freedom. I don't know which is worse, the trap or the prison. Either way, you're stuck.

(Whitehead 38-39)

Whitehead's description of the Sag Harbor and the city as a type of prison serves as both a reference to the violences of the prison industrial complex¹⁵⁵, and a complication of DuBois' theory of double-consciousness. This exchange between narratives of confinement and escape addresses the specificities of post-modern urban environments, the ways it both literally imprisoned much of the young, black male population and metaphorically “trapped” middle and upper-class African-Americans in the commodified representations of hip-hop. Whether Benji and his friends are within or outside the confines of the city, narratives of urban poverty and black criminality overwhelm other ways of understanding the self and the hip-hop generation. These restrictive material and discursive environments

¹⁵⁵ See Michelle Alexander (2010) and Angela Davis (2001; 2003) for more information on the development of the prison industrial complex throughout the twentieth century.

leave Benji with a feeling of insecurity and an ill-defined identity; as he notes, “Either way, you’re stuck” (39).

However, Whitehead also focuses on Sag Harbor as a place where people come to get “out” of these narrowly proscribed boundaries. Located beyond “hip-hop’s formative spaces” (Forman xx), the novel creates spaces and characters that are inflected by their relationship to hip-hop culture, but whose identity rests beyond narrow categorizations of race and class. More than a place “we were grateful to be...after such a long bleak year in the city” (4), Sag Harbor it is defined by a language of escape, of going somewhere that exceeds compartmentalization. A reflection of this literal and metaphoric move beyond the discourses and confines of the city, the novel begins with a description of seemingly simple, but oft-repeated questions: “When did you get out?” (1); “How long are you out for?” (2). Everyone who comes to Sag Harbor is, in one way or another, viewed as ‘out’: out of school, outside of the city, and representationally ‘out’side of the dominant discursive spaces that cannot account for a community of upper-middle class black citizens. Although distinct from the city, the beach community is a site that both replicates and modifies the cultural aesthetics and discourses associated with urban environments. Having spent their whole lives experiencing two vastly different discursive localities, Benji and his friends view Sag Harbor as a place where they can exchange cultural information and knowledge without sacrificing their own experiences or forms of identification. Described as not only the place where one “gets down to the business of summer” (5), Sag Harbor is the location where Benji and his friends have the opportunity “observe and gather information” (38) about the various registers that contribute to their identity. Away from the city and his experiences living in New York City and attending a “‘predominantly white’ private school”, Benji

spends his summer “catching up on the nine months of black slang and other sundry soulful artifacts” (37) that eluded him during his time learning the intricacies of Bar Mitzvah’s, roller rinks, hackey sack, and lacrosse players. Caught between two understandings of the self that emerge in two different locations, Benji treats his time in the city as important “in the anthropological sense”, but secondary to the cultural education and transformations possible in Sag Harbor. As Benji describes, “In idle moments, I retreated into that early-summer dream of reinvention where you set your eyes on September and that refurbished self you were going to tool around in...”(29). A combination of catching up on slang, trends, dances, and “the assorted field of black boot camp” (38), Benji’s time in Sag Harbor exposes him to a wide range of hip-hop aesthetics while offering him an opportunity to reflect on the confining discourses of urban environments. As he states in the closing lines of his opening section, “Once we’re all out, we can begin.” Whitehead understands that his characters cannot be easily defined by narratives of locality, therefore he suggests that it is only after Benji, his friends, the community’s occupants, and the reader reach Sag Harbor that they will be able to grapple with these competing representations and historically rooted, but modified forms of aesthetics.

Satirizing Signifyin’: Vernacular Culture in Post-Modern Identity Formation

Shifting from the exodus ‘out’ to Sag Harbor to the verbal exchanges that characterize Benji and his friends’ conversations, the novel deploys crass forms of signification to satirize contemporary vernacular theories. In contrast to his discussion of locality, which outlines how space can become a singular site for presupposing African-American identity, Whitehead’s careful lampooning of vernacular theory points to the risk of applying academic theories without addressing the individual contexts from which these

expressions emerge. A groundbreaking text that emerged (not inconsequently) right around the time period Whitehead outlines for *Sag Harbor*¹⁵⁶, Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s book *The Signifying Monkey* presents his African-American literary and vernacular theory with a historical gravitas that occasionally digresses into the absurd. Identified by Gates as "the great trope of African-American discourse" (21), the Signifying Monkey is a trickster figure that is rooted in East African oral traditions, but ultimately serves to trouble the divisions between written and oral forms of communication in African-American literature. Presenting this process of "repetition and revision" as a genealogy of authentic blackness or black cultural expression, Gates argues that "whatever is black about black American literature is to be found in this identifiable black Signifyin(g) difference" (xxvi). Through detailed charts and carefully constructed linguistic analysis, Gates painstakingly walks out how theories of deconstruction and formal linguistics offer a glimpse into these collective reiterations of African-American cultural identity.

In order to question academia's often overwrought association between traditions of signifying and contemporary expressions of hip-hop culture¹⁵⁷, Whitehead satirizes the tradition through Benji and his friends' crass teenage exchanges. This not only questions

¹⁵⁶ Set in the summer of 1985, Whitehead fixes his novel at a crucial time in both the emergence of hip-hop and within a series of debates about the nature of post-soul aesthetics (see Trey Ellis and Eric Lott). Gates book *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* was first published in 1988, but can also be contextualized in relation to a series of other vernacular theories that included, Houston A. Baker's *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory* (1984), Hortense Spiller's "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book" (1987), Joyce A. Joyce's "The Black Canon" (1987), and Mae Gwendolyn Henderson's "Speaking in Tongues: Dialogics, Dialectics, and the Black Woman Writer's Literary Tradition" (1989).

¹⁵⁷ For instance, in Adam Bradley's 2009 book *Book of Rhymes*, he spends the entire chapter drawing associations between signifying practices and nearly every ancient and contemporary example he can muster. This includes discussions of Beowulf, the NBA, *Saturday Night Live*, William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and Aristotle's *Poetics*.

the efficacy of signification as a singular method for understanding contemporary African-American identity, it also questions the presumptions that these artists understand signification in the same ways hip-hop historiographers have situated them. As Whitehead describes, freedom from their parents five days a week and boredom often produced vulgar and asinine conversations: “Now that we had a free house, what did we do with it? Sit around and talk shit” (51). Discussing how “the trend that summer, insult-wise, was towards grammatical acrobatics”, Benji explains the seemingly simplistic ways “one smashed a colorful and evocative noun or proper noun into a pejorative, gluing them together with an -in verb” (Whitehead 51) to achieve the perfect put down. This attempt to explain shit talking through a juxtaposition of casual modifiers (“smashed”, “gluing”) and the language of formal grammatology not only mocks Gates academic voice, but also suggests that theories of signification carry the risk of overwhelming other narratives of cultural identification. Although all of the boys are deeply invested in the verbal game of cat and mouse being played out every day in their living rooms, car rides, walks to the beach, and down time, very few of them are acquainted with the ‘supposed’ significance of the techniques they are sharing. As Benji points out in his breakdown of the excited exchanges, “Verbal noun, gerundlike creature, cog in the adjectival machine, who knew—as was the case with some of the people in my living room, there was a little uncertainty in the bloodlines” (51-52). Incompatible with their methods of understanding themselves and their relationship to the past, this language of linguistics and grammatology actually obscures the past rather than enlightening its importance for the present. Benji and his friends feel “a little uncertainty in the bloodlines” because like the “Famous Black People I Had Never Heard Of” (17), there is the expectation that they should know better or identify

differently with their cultural or ethnic identity. Carrying on the tradition of signifyin', but doing so through a chart of the playful and often humorous exchanges between friends, Whitehead outlines the competing and contradictory interests that Benji and his friends actually engage with in their process of self-identification. These charts are below and have been paired with a few of Gates' charts to further demonstrate the satire at work in this section:

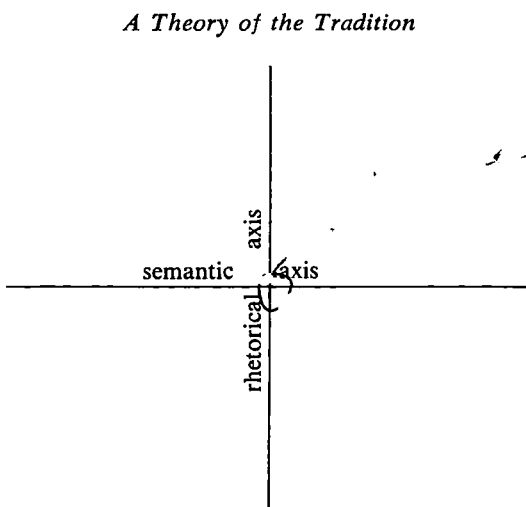
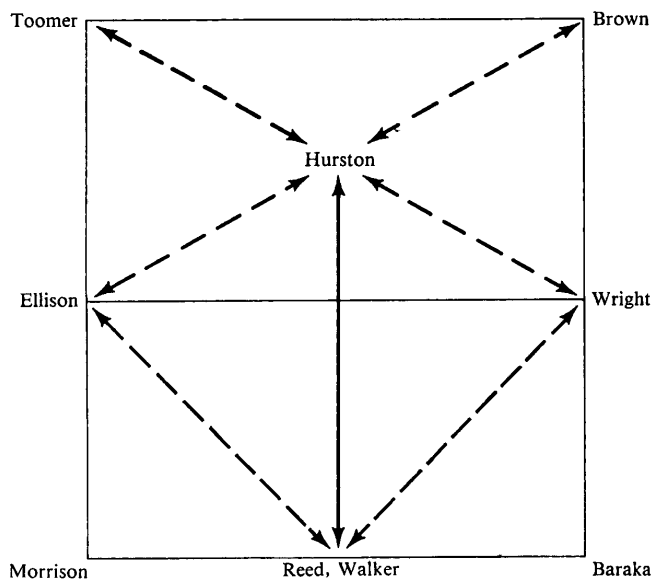


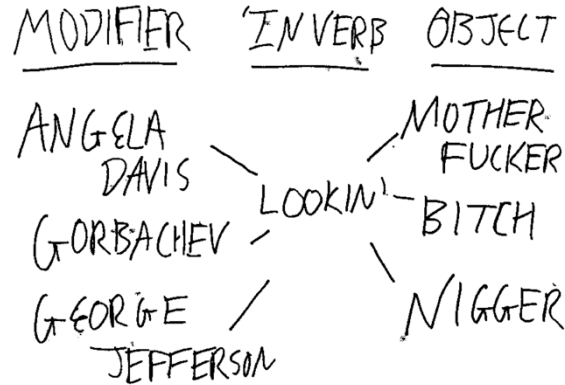
Chart 1. The Sign, "Signification"

112

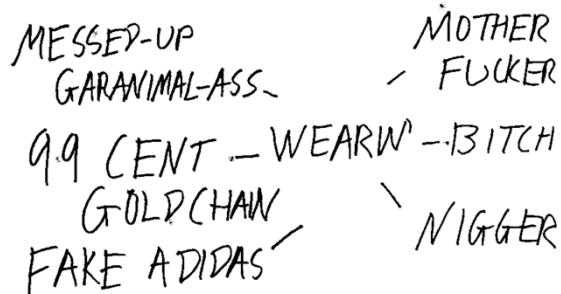
A Theory of the Tradition



Like so:



“Wearin’ ” made the rounds as well:



The inclusion of this hand-scratched chart satirizes Gates mechanical display of the relationships between authors and language that dissociate signifyin' from the very categorical distinctions it is designed to evade. Although it reflects Gates assertion that signifyin' is “a part of our adolescent education”, the examples chosen by Whitehead gesture towards the ways increasingly global and commercialized forms of identification obscure the relationships between historical genealogies and black cultural expression. From political figures to television stars and Adidas tennis shoes to a popular brand of children’s clothes and figures (Garanimals), the references here gesture towards the disaggregated references and commercial obfuscations that signifyin' has now come to deploy. While this scene maintains its association with the Signifying Monkey’s ability to “carp, cajole, needle, and lie” and “making fun of a person or situation” (Gates 75), the

concern Benji and his friends show with appearing authentic, with avoiding a “99 cent gold chain” or “fake Adidas” reveals the difficulty of defining one’s self in a world that promises it can do so through commodification and popular culture. Contrasted with the repeated objects of “motherfucker”, “bitch”, and “nigger”, this seemingly endless string of modifiers is still discursively tied to degrading and reductive representations. Signifying, as it is represented in contemporary culture, must engage with both of the possibility of misrepresentation and entirely new ways of understanding and writing aesthetic genealogies. As Tricia Rose points out, the oral practices of signification were fundamentally altered by their relationship with contemporary technological cultures:

Rap’s poetic force, its rearticulation of African-American oral practices, and its narrative strategies are central to rap. However, rap’s oral and technological facets are more interactive than this disjuncture suggests. Rap music blurs the distinction between literate and oral modes of communication by altering and sustaining important aspects of African-American folk orality while embedding oral practices in the technology itself. Rap’s orality is altered and highly informed by the technology that produces it; and in rap, oral logic informs its technological practices. Redefining the constitution of narrative originality, composition, and collective memory, rap artists challenge institutional apparatuses that define property, technological innovation, and authorship. (85)

Since Benji and his friends have only encountered these practices of signification through the technological innovations of deejays and the machinations of contemporary culture, their understanding of the historical basis of these musical-oral cultures is quite different

from that of Gates. While Benji notes that “true masters of the style sometimes attached the nonsensical ‘with your monkey ass’ as a kicker, to convey sincerity and depth of feeling” (53), he does not recognize this as a call back to the East African figure of the Signifying Monkey. He simply views it as another subtle method of indicating your linguistic prowess to others in the group. The fact that “masters” are always associated with the introduction of the monkey and that this is read as “nonsensical” by Benji and his friends allows the reader to see how these practices have been both maintained and disrupted by the technologies and consumerism specific to the post-soul generation.

By taking a concept that is now universally acknowledged as foundational to hip-hop practice and carefully modifying it to include new forms of identification and experience, Whitehead does not destroy the tradition as much as he updates it. Taking one final moment to reflect on the power and implications of this practice, Benji describes how:

The heart of the critique concerned what you were putting out into the world, the vibes you gave off. Which is what made them so devastating when executed well—this ordinance detonated in that area between you and the mirror, between you and what you thought everyone else was seeing.

(Whitehead 53)

Despite their misunderstanding of signifying practices historical genealogy, Benji and his friends understand the difficulty of manipulating one’s image to either contend with or fulfill the expectations of their peers or society. Here Whitehead is not only replicating the “tension between the oral and the written modes of narration” (21) described by Gates, but modifying the idea to reveal the complications of identity formation within the post-soul aesthetic. Faced with both the inter-racial conflation of African-American identity with hip-

hop's localities, lyrics, or visual representations and the intra-racial expectations of cultural and historical knowledge, Benji and his friends create narratives of indeterminacy. Like the Signifying Monkey and the hip-hop artist they are constantly engaged with "a never ending battle for status, prestige, and group adoration, always in formation, always contested, and never fully achieved" (Rose 3). Without models for their experience or a series of stable cultural identifiers around which to rally, Benji and his friends must experiment, must slip in and out of borrowed and reconfigured identities until they can settle on the combination that best represents themselves.

The New Black Aesthetic, Hip-Hop, and the Paradox of Essentialized Racial Representation in the Post-Soul Generation

Enthusiastically described by Trey Ellis in his essay "The New Black Aesthetic" as the artistic offspring of young black men and women who were "educated by a multi-racial mix of cultures", the NBA thrives on the multiplicity of identification and the ability of post-soul youngsters to create representations of themselves that no longer pander to the expectations of historical or ideological discourse. A manifesto for the "minority's minority mushrooming with the current black bourgeoisie boom", Ellis argues that contemporary black aesthetics has severed itself from the self-hatred and white envy of previous generations. Defined as "a cultural mulatto" by Ellis, this new generation was "educated by a multi-racial mix of cultures". Not only can they "navigate easily in the white world", they "no longer need to deny or suppress any part of our complicated and sometimes contradictory cultural baggage to please either white people or black" (235). Inclusive of middle and upper-class experiences as vital to an understanding of the post-soul

generation's aesthetic, Ellis espouses a view that is attentive to the intersecting narratives of class, race, music, and history that inform 21st century African-American identity. What he does not account for, as Eric Lott notes in his response to Ellis' essay, is the vast expansion of African-American primary texts in circulation. As he describes:

We live in a period notable for the enlargement of what is known as black culture itself...these acts of self-conscious tradition-making are surely a mark of our cultural moment, as important to notions of current black culture as the publication of Marx's early manuscripts in the 1930s was to Western Marxism. (245)

While both of these sentiments coexisted across the 1980s, Whitehead is attentive the challenges of navigating both the cultural hybridity of the present and its new explorations of previous historical identities and narratives. As Benji comments, "Black boys with beach houses. It could mess with your head sometimes, if you were the susceptible sort" (72). Challenging the supposed self-confidence and freedom of growing up in a generation that shunned the compartmentalization of identity, Benji describes how his friends would often reconfigure essentialized representations of race in an effort to cope with their "shifting subjectivity in the modern world" (Weheliye 20). For those people who found the expectations of both the black and white world overwhelming, there were several "typical and well-known" identities one could embrace in their search for some sort of 'authentic' blackness. As Benji observes, you can either unapologetically "revel in the perception of

status, wallow without care in what it meant to be born in America with money...No apologies” or slip into any number of subjectivities associated with African-American identity across the nineteenth and twentieth century.

You could embrace the black part—take some idea you had about what real blackness was, and make theater of it, your 24-7 one-man show. Folks of this type could pick Bootstrapping Striver or Proud Pillar, but the most popular brands were Militant or Street, Militant being the opposite of bourgie capitulation to The Man, and Street being the antidote to Upper Middle Class emasculation. Street, Ghetto. Act hard, act out, act in a way that would come to be called gangsterish, pulling petty crimes, a soft kind of tough, knowing there was always someone to post bail if one of your grubby schemes fell apart. (Whitehead 72)

A layer of connotations that stand in for major male African-American thinkers, the list Benji provides is also referred to as “a theater” of expressions, all of them designed to prove you had an idea about “what real blackness was.” Although they can only vaguely distill the connections between themselves and the past, the invocation of the “Bootstrapping Striver” and “Proud Pillar” immediately bring up thoughts of the famous debates between Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. DuBois. Although he does not directly reference their works, the audience member who is informed, who knows the major

debates about the sources of freedom in African-American literary thought will hear their echoes:

...Negroes must first deal with the Talented Tenth; it is the problem of developing the Best of this race that they may guide the Mass away from the contamination and death of the Worst, in their own and other races... If we make money the object of man training, we shall develop money makers but not necessarily men...Men we shall have only as we make manhood the object of the work of schools... -W.E.B. DuBois, "The Talented Tenth" (1903)

I explained that my theory of education for the Negro would not, for example, confine him for all time to farm life—to the production of the best and most sweet potatoes—but that, if he succeeded in this line of industry, he could lay the foundations upon which his children and grandchildren could grow to higher and more important things in life. – Booker T. Washington, *Up From Slavery* (1901)

The story is being told from the future, from Benji's perspective now that he is older and has a better sense of the relationships between his past and present. Whitehead knows these voices and understands the tradition he enters into, even as he modifies it. A method of pastiche and collage, Whitehead whirls through more layers of references, benchmarks of "the customary schedule for good middle-class boys and girls...to get Militant and Afrocentric the first semester of freshman year in college" (72). More a rite of passage than an identity to permanently endorse, there were certain patterns of shared knowledge, ways the community could familiarize the context of the past and filter it into their understanding of themselves in the present.

Underlining key passages in *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* and that passed around paperback of *Black Skins, White Masks*. Organize a march or two to protest the lack of tenure for that controversial professor in the Department of Black Studies. Organize a march or two to protest the lack of a Department of Black Studies. It passed the time until business school. (Whitehead 73)

For Benji's friend Bobby, and others like him, the voices of Franz Fanon and Malcolm X create an unidentified confusion about their personal identities. Their inability to locate their identity in a sea of competing and often contradictory images creates anxiety and leaves one feeling incomplete. Their inclusion also reveals the convoluted temporal dimensions of post-soul narratives and hip-hop aesthetics. The "Bootstrapping Striver" and "Proud Pillar" are only vaguely recognizable to Benji and his friends, but the origins of "Militant" philosophies can be narrowed down to specific texts, to voices that will resonate in the behavior of Bobby and the aesthetics of groups like Public Enemy. For the reader who can decipher the intertextual references and layers of symbolic meaning, the voices of Malcolm X and Franz Fanon echo through their mind. For it is in the past that the reader can locate both a problem and tentative solution for the present, where they can explore the ruptures in African-American identity formation and the continuities of feeling that tie them together, however loosely.

In effect, what happens is this: As I begin to recognize that the Negro is the symbol of sin, I catch myself hating the Negro. But then I recognize that I am a Negro. There are two ways out of this conflict. Either I ask others to pay no attention to my skin, or else I want them to be aware of it...In order to terminate this neurotic situation, in which I am compelled to choose an unhealthy, conflictual situation, fed on fantasies, hostile, inhuman in short I have only one solution: to rise above this absurd drama that others have staged round me, to reject the two terms that are equally unacceptable...to reach out for the universal. – Franz Fanon, *Black Skins, White Masks* (1952)

My brothers and sisters, our white slavemaster's Christian religion has taught us black people here in the wilderness of North America that we will sprout wings when we die and fly up to the sky where God will have for us a special place called heaven. This is the white man's Christian religion to *brainwash* us black people! We have *accepted* it! We have *embraced* it! We have *believed* it! We have *practiced* it! And while we are doing all of that, for himself, this blue-eyed devil has *twisted* his Christianity, to keep his foot on our backs...while *he* enjoys *his* heaven right *here...on this earth...in this life*. – Malcolm X, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (1964)

These implied voices, whether reflecting the intricacies of self-hatred or the hostilities that emerge from it, influence not only Benji's understanding of himself, but the reader's understanding of what he will later call his "paradox" (72). Even the construction of a persona for acting "Street" is convoluted for Benji and his friends. A combination of their inexperience with post-industrial environments and the rise of hip-hop into the mainstream imagination, the boys imagine the 'gangster' persona to be "a soft kind of tough", an excuse to "act hard. Act out" (72). Another supposedly 'authentic' representation of African-American identity, this persona is a reinterpretation of the images being disseminated and promoted by the music industry. As Imani Perry discusses:

...artists began appearing who personified gangsters without having ever experienced that lifestyle: record companies manufactured gangsters for their sensational appeal...Gangsterism turned into a commercial tool...Hip-hop heads made an effort to weed out the commercial gangsters from the 'real' ones, and so rumors of suburban birthplaces and respectable middle-class childhoods of certain MCs surfaced as evidence of their inauthenticity, even though hip-hop had been a cross-class art form for years. (94)

In an attempt to be relevant, to garner attention, or to simply justify their inclusion into the African-American community, the boys replicate the commodified images permeating music and mass media. Although "it never occurred to us that there was anything strange about it" (Whitehead 70), Benji and his friends' attempts to prove they are not susceptible to the "Upper Middle Class emasculation" (72) or the narratives of post-industrial neglect only leave them in further doubt of their identity. A cultural expression that thrives on the intersection between the familiar and the unfamiliar, between constructions of the past and

their reconstruction in the present, hip-hop provides both a crude outline and a complex form of representation.

As Benji is watching his friends go through this process of identification and reidentification, there is a feeling of instability, as though none of these categorical definitions satisfy his desire to for definability, for a clear picture of who he is. Although it temporarily, and sometimes permanently, satisfied his friends, Benji is always “keeping my eyes open, gathering data, more and more facts, because if I had enough information I might know how to be. Listening and watching, taking notes for something that might one day be a diagram for invention, a working self with moving parts” (Whitehead 84). Similar to the scene with DuBois, Benji is in constant negotiation with his fragmented cultural consciousness. There are continuities between the past and present, but they are isolated and incomplete, more a “diagram for invention” than an explication of true identity.

With so many competing messages, Benji finds you can either negotiate with a carousel of identities, “or you could embrace the contradiction, say what you call paradox, I call *myself*. In theory. Those inclined to this remedy didn’t have many obvious models” (72). Once he realizes that there are not “many obvious models” for embracing his position as a modern-day paradox, Benji finds his own heroes in the likes of hip-hop artists, particularly deejays such as Afrika Bambaata. An explication of the ways technological developments can be manipulated to offer new formulations of identity construction, Bambaata’s use of samples from German electro-pop band Kraftwerk and Benji’s knowledge of that fact combine to create powerful insights:

I like what Afrika did with Kraftwerk...They dismantled this piece of white culture and produced this freakish and sustaining thing, reconfiguring the

chilly original into a communal artifact...Probably it was up on Planet Rock where I wanted to be half the time, where they transported all us unlikely chosen, *Close Encounters*—style. There were other places besides this, the song said. I wasn't trying to rag on Afrika, but salute his oddball achievement. His paradox. (77)

In this scene, sampling is viewed as an antidote to embracing a fixed position for the sake of stability. In fact, it encourages individuality, a reconfiguration of popular identifications for the sake of understanding one's self in a more complete way. The ability of Bambaata to transform the turntable and fragments of the past into a "freakish and sustaining thing" is a sort of other worldly encounter for Benji. A symbol of Afrofuturism¹⁵⁸, Bambaata's album covers promised an experience free from the constraints of mediated images, urban localities, and even Earth itself. As Jeff Chang points out, Bambaata was a neighborhood hero, a person who "was ready to take people across borders they didn't know they could cross, into projects they weren't sure they could be in" (89). As Bamabaata imagines a new future for rap music and young black men and women, Benji embraces his "oddball achievement", or ability to communicate an identity that can rise above the parameters of circumstance and consumerism through the manipulation of technology and technological futures. In hip-hop culture, the refashioning of technology and urban environments to capture the expressions of young, disenfranchised men and women "speaks to dreams of coherence in a fractured world" (Dery 185) and imaginings of identity that are far beyond

¹⁵⁸ Defined by Mark Dery in 1993, Afrofuturism is considered to be "any speculative fiction that treats African-American themes and addresses African-American concerns in the context of twentieth century technoculture—and, more generally, African-American signification that appropriates images of technology and a prosthetically enhanced future..." (181). See also Ytasha Womack (2013) for contemporary interpretations of Afrofuturism.

the confines of locality. Reflective of the paradox of technological culture more generally, Benji's admires hip-hop's innovative aesthetics, even as he sees them being manipulated to create crude models for his friends. As George Lipsitz describes, technology is both a method for creating "novelties within and alternatives to commodity-consumer culture":

The very forms most responsible for the erosion of historical and local knowledge can sometimes be the sources of reconnection in the hands of ingenuous artists and audiences. By these processes they remember their own actual pasts, but they also use the powers of electronic mass media to transcend space and time, connecting themselves to the pasts of others, pasts that bear moral and political lessons. (261)

In drawing direct and immediate associations between hip-hop aesthetics and Benji's search for identity, Whitehead demonstrates both the limitations and possibilities of technological developments for expressing the historical narratives of the post-soul generation. Even as the music is co-opted by consumer culture and mass media, it still contains the capacity to create alternative historical narratives, to "transcend space and time" in the search for and creation of new identities. Not simply given, stable, or complete, historical narrative is a process of configuration and reconfiguration, of unlikely elements that come together to give one, hopefully, a sense of their past and their future. As Benji goes on to note, all of the people of Sag Harbor would perhaps not know the importance of their relationships until a much later date: "Something drew you together but you didn't understand that secret undertow until one day after years and years of talking, it comes, the key story that lays it all out" (Whitehead 317). The narrator, who is speaking from the future, reminds the reader that it sometimes takes years before one can parse apart the

layers, the multifarious representations, the sounds, images, and texts that will eventually coalesce into a tentatively comfortable representation of the self. Even as Whitehead works both within and beyond hip-hop's conventional definitions, he is able to implement hip-hop aesthetics to create new narratives of blackness in the post-modern era. Through the techniques of sampling, mixing, signifying, pastiche, collage, and dynamic suggestion¹⁵⁹, Whitehead gestures towards the discourses that manipulate black representation and the technologies that created entirely new definitions for young African-American men and women. As Ytasha Womack discusses in her research on contemporary African-American authors, there is a necessity to shift the paradigms of academic and popular discourse, to consider how the statement "*I, too, am African-American*"¹⁶⁰ reflects the "changing landscape of today's African-American population." This group:

...includes those who don't fit into the nation's collective definition of itself, who don't fit into the African-American regime's idea of itself, who aren't represented by politicians or preachers, don't match the hip-hop inflected media stereotypes nor the enhanced images of ridiculous wealth, stupendous crimes, or destitute poverty flashed on the evening news. They are a new breed with different ideals and a variety of lifestyles that go unnoticed, untapped, and unwanted by the so-called defenders of black identity

¹⁵⁹ I am borrowing this phrase from Zora Neale Hurston and her discussions of black dancers: "Negro dancing is dynamic suggestion. No matter how violent it may appear to the beholder, every posture gives the impression that the dancer will do much more...It is compelling insinuation. That is the very reason the spectator is held so rapt. He is participating in the performance himself—carrying out the suggestions of the performer" (35). This is my inspiration for including the quotes from Fanon, Malcolm X, DuBois, and Booker T. Washington. It signals the reader's participation in the narrative.

¹⁶⁰ Clearly a reference to Langston Hughes famous poem "I, Too, Sing America", this insight modifies the past to explicate on the present.

because, in shifting the paradigm, these outliers shift the power to define what being African-American truly is (27).

Whitehead's text provides an excellent example of hip post-soul aesthetics are continuing to shift the landscape of conversations about hip-hop and its ability to represent a variety of African-American constituencies. It is the "unnoticed, untapped, and unwanted" segment of hip-hop scholarship that must be paid more attention to and given detailed consideration in the future.

Conclusion

As the senseless deaths of Mike Brown, Trayvon Martin, Sandra Bland, Eric Garner, and countless other young black men and women have transformed the political landscape of yet another generation, it is invaluable to consider how hip-hop and technological culture inflects these conversations. As widespread and influential as it has ever been, and in a wider range of industries, hip-hop represents an ever-evolving conversation about race, gender, culture, ethnicity, politics, economics, and art in the 21st century. It is time that hip-hop scholars begin to invent new ways of discussing these narratives. Alexander Michelle's *The New Jim Crow* deserves a full-length study addressed to the continuities between hip-hop and 19th, 20th, and 21st century representations of prison, the prison industrial complex, and law enforcement. With artists such as Chuck D, KRS One, Common, and Dead Prez, amongst many other politically conscious rappers still working and discussing their motivations, it is invaluable to consider their relationship to Black Power, the Civil Rights Movement, Black Lives Matter, Barack Obama, and a variety of African and African-American leaders in the past and present. It is not my intent that we discard the origins of hip-hop and the very specific, social, economic, technological, politically environments from which it sprang, but that we begin to extend beyond those temporal and sociological boundaries. Hip-hop has become far, far more than any of those creators in the Bronx and Brooklyn could have ever imagined. And it is beautiful. Graffiti cultural has arguably become one of the most widespread, sustained, and technically advanced forms of art making in the last forty years. Kendrick Lamar is still finding ways to challenge the forefathers of rap, in both production and lyricism. Beyoncé simply owns it all. Our understanding of hip-hop's aesthetics and its influences must evolve with the music itself,

or else, we will forego countless opportunities to understand how hip-hop communicates both to the specificity of its present and the layered genealogies of its past.

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